



**THE STRANGE CASE OF JAYSH AL-MAHDI AND MR. ISIS:
HOW KYRGYZSTAN'S ELITES MANIPULATE THE THREAT OF
TERRORISM FOR THEIR OWN BENEFIT**

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If the 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT) emanated from the United States (US), its consequences have been felt far and well beyond its borders, due to US adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq and their disastrous consequences for those countries, combined with autocratic regimes borrowing the same discourse of the fight against terrorism in order to stay in power and to reduce even further the already limited space for dissenting voices. This is certainly true in the Middle East and Central Asia, two regions whose study in Western policy circles post-9/11 has been skewed by a security prism because of their Muslim majority populations and the assumption that any Muslim is, by default, susceptible to radicalization.

Kyrgyzstan, long hailed as an island of democracy in a tough Central Asian neighborhood, has not been immune to this trend. The fight against terrorism has been and continues to be a powerful discourse for the country's elites and security apparatus used to secure funds internationally and silence popular discontent domestically, while averting attention from more pressing matters. Significantly, terrorism is on everyone's mind but the security services actively discourage research on the issue, preferring a near-total monopoly on information that the population is supposed to accept as revealed truth.

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While the Soviet legacy of suspicion vis-à-vis religion still informs the elites' threat perception—resonating with the older, educated, Russophile city dwellers—it fails to account for the last 25 years of independence during which Islam has witnessed a revival in Kyrgyzstan as an important cultural and religious identity marker for the general population. There is a clear continuum between Western discourses on terrorism and the Kyrgyz government's version in that, to use Professor Richard Jackson's words, much of this discourse is “politically biased, but more importantly, it functions ideologically to reinforce and reify existing structures of power in society, particularly that of the state, and to promote particular elite political projects.”³

This article endeavors to contribute to the literature by illustrating how elites in Kyrgyzstan manipulate the threat of terrorism to fit their domestic agenda, while trying to maximize their interests with international donors. It presents the results of research into two specific incidents in Kyrgyzstan that raise serious questions about the sincerity of the authorities' claims, while showing the myriad of ways in which they have misrepresented the facts for their own benefit. The two cases have been selected because, to date, one represents the only example of an alleged home-grown terrorist group in Kyrgyzstan since it achieved independence in 1991, while the other is the only Islamic State (ISIS) cell to have been dismantled in the country.

The first incident regards Jaysh al-Mahdi (JM), an alleged terrorist group that was active in 2010-11, before its members were either killed or captured. The latter were then tortured into confessing to terrorism offenses and most were given hefty jail sentences, including imprisonment for life. Apart from the fact that JM may be a Shia group in Sunni Kyrgyzstan, it became active at a time of high political instability in the country, which had experienced a violent coup d'état in April 2010 followed by clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the south in May to June of the same year. The then-Interim Government (IG) manipulated the threat of terrorism exemplified by JM in order to justify its crackdown on opponents, thus tightening its grip on power and ultimately surviving. Parallel to this, in the ensuing years, the Kyrgyz government managed to secure millions of dollars in US military aid, notably in the form of Special Forces training in counter-terrorism.

The second incident concerns a July 2015 shoot-out in the capital, Bishkek, in which the security services claimed to have killed or captured members of an ISIS cell. As little evidence was provided, many questioned the official narrative, especially when it became apparent that several 'ISIS terrorists' were actually part of a criminal gang. Furthermore, in the months that followed, the authorities started fusing and confusing members of ISIS and JM, effectively implying that they simultaneously belonged to a Shia millenarian militia and a Sunni extremist group.

During this time, Kyrgyzstan finalized its accession to the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), a decision that was increasingly contested given the Kremlin's military adventurism in Ukraine and the ensuing Western sanctions crippling Russia's economy. Public opinion was conveniently too preoccupied with ISIS and JM to pay attention to the near absence of solid information concerning the pros and cons of Kyrgyzstan's joining the EEU. But again, it was domestic considerations that drew the authorities to push the discourse of the fight against terrorism. With the October 2015 elections looming, the President's Social Democratic Party (SDPK) could run on a ticket of stability by presenting itself as tough on terrorism. At the polls, the SDPK won almost a third of all parliamentary seats, becoming the biggest party in the country.

³ Richard Jackson, “Knowledge, Power and Politics in the Study of Political Terrorism,” in R. Jackson, M. Breen-Smyth and J. Gunning, *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 69.

A couple of provisos are in order here. While the article highlights how elites in Kyrgyzstan have articulated a specific security discourse on terrorism to benefit from it—ensuring their political survival, securing external funding, silencing domestic dissent and diverting attention from other issues affecting the general population—the authors are aware that this is not the *only* discourse fit for purpose. Labelling non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as ‘foreign agents’ as well as the naming and shaming of people with alternative lifestyles (such as the LGBTQ community) has been conspicuously used by elites in past years to crack down on opponents and silence dissent by promoting a witch hunt against purported enemies of the state.⁴ Terrorism, however, has been a powerful discourse among the others, and perhaps the most powerful, not least because of the international context of the GWOT.

Finally, while some of the contradictions identified in the paper may be ascribed to the amateurism of some institutions in Kyrgyzstan, including the security services, the sheer amount and extent of the inconsistencies found in the two cases analyzed a clear pattern. Moreover, the systematic torture and/or physical elimination of terror suspects in both cases, as well as pressure on the judiciary to deliver guilty verdicts in the JM one, seem to confirm that the Kyrgyz authorities chose to push the discourse on the terrorism threat even when the evidence was ice-thin and despite the fact that the official line presented severe inconsistencies. That they were poised to benefit from such a line cannot be only and always coincidental.

Islam in Kyrgyzstan: From Soviet Rule to Independence to the GWOT

Islam came to Central Asia with the Arab conquests of the 8th century AD, which introduced the region to a plurality of trends within Islamic thought, from the Hanafi Sunni school to a variety of Sufi orders, with the Naqshbandiya being the most influential and widespread among the latter.⁵ Islam maintained a prominent function in Central Asian life through the centuries, but this changed sharply with the rise of the Bolsheviks in Russia following the October 1917 revolution, which ushered in a 70-year period of Soviet rule in the region.

Under the official state policy of atheism, religious repression became the hallmark of the Soviet Union’s approach to Islam. In 1927, the Soviets launched a massive campaign to unveil Muslim women and girls, a custom they perceived as backward and thus to be eliminated on the path to creating a new social order. In history books, the campaign is remembered as the *hujum*, a term that in Turkic languages translates as ‘assault,’ indicating the strong popular resistance it encountered.⁶

Repression intensified, particularly after the adoption of the 1929 law ‘On Religious Associations,’ which coincided with the wholesale closure of mosques and Sharia courts in the region. As Martha Brill Olcott put it, “[d]uring the 1930s, thousands of mosques were declared decrepit, then closed. Many were destroyed or, worse, used for some kind of

⁴ Franco Galdini, “Kyrgyzstan’s NGO and LGBT Crackdown,” *The Diplomat*, March 17, 2016, available at <http://thediplomat.com/2016/03/kyrgyzstans-ngo-and-lgbt-crackdown/>. All online material accessed in July 2016.

⁵ “Central Asia: Islam and the State,” International Crisis Group (ICG) Asia Report #59 (2003): 1, available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/059-central-asia-islam-and-the-state.aspx>; Farhat Alvi, “The Significant Role of Sufism in Central Asia,” University of the Punjab, available at [http://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/uoc/PDF-FILES/\(2\)%20The%20Significant%20Role%20of%20Sufism%20in%20Central%20Asia%20\(Dr.%20Farh.pdf](http://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/uoc/PDF-FILES/(2)%20The%20Significant%20Role%20of%20Sufism%20in%20Central%20Asia%20(Dr.%20Farh.pdf).

⁶ Douglas Northrop, “*Hujum, 1927*,” in *Veiled Empire: Gender & Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 69.

sacrilegious purpose. The Jome (Gumbaz) Mosque in Namangan, for example, was made into a wine factory.”⁷

By the 1940s, however, “thinking that [it] may play a useful role in the war effort, Stalin relaxed his persecution of religion slightly, ordering the creation of state-supervised Religious Councils.”⁸ The Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) was established in 1943 in Tashkent, in the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, laying the foundation of what would become the state-led spiritual administrations in Central Asia’s independent republics—the so-called Muftiate.” “By the 1960s Central Asian Islam had become Sovietized—not eliminated, but outwardly subordinated to and routinized by the Soviet state.”⁹ As in much of the rest of the region, the SADUM’s representative in Soviet Kyrgyzstan—called a *qadi*—administered the state-sanctioned Islam under the supervision of the Soviet security apparatus. During the 1980s, Islam in Central Asia benefitted from the new policies of *perestroika* (‘restructuring’) and *glasnost* (‘openness’) introduced under Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, which signaled a more open attitude toward religion.

Post-independence Kyrgyzstan continued to pursue a policy of openness in the religious sphere, leading to a staggering revival of Islam in people’s everyday life:

According to data by the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA), while in 1990 there were 39 mosques operating in Kyrgyzstan, in 2014 that number reached 2,362 mosques and 81 Islamic schools, [as well as] 68 registered Muslim centers, foundations and association involved in educational, awareness-raising and charitable activities and the construction of places of worship.¹⁰

In parallel to this renaissance, however, disquiet grew among the Kyrgyz authorities, whose worldview was (and is) still considerably informed by the Soviet legacy of suspicion towards religion. As a result, the government tried to maintain a certain degree of control over religion via the Muftiate and other institutions. The SCRA, for instance, was created in 1995 with the goal of registering all religious organizations in the country.¹¹

Suspicion only increased after the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)—a terrorist group hailing from neighboring Uzbekistan—conducted a series of incursions into Kyrgyzstan’s south-western Batken province in 1999 and 2000, forcing the government to deploy “the Southern Group of Forces comprising approximately six thousand troops from various components of the armed forces” to repeal it.¹²

The country’s authorities, however, never excelled at adopting a nuanced approach to the disparate Islamic groups now present on their territory, using instead accusations of

⁷ Martha Brill Olcott, “Islam and the State in the Soviet Union,” in *In the Whirlwind of Jihad* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012), 61, available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wpjxb.8>.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 62.

⁹ Eric McGlinchey, “Autocrats, Islamists, and the Rise of Radicalism in Central Asia,” *Current History* (2005): 336, available at http://mason.gmu.edu/~emcglinc/final_mcglin_current_history.pdf.

¹⁰ The State Commission of Religious Affairs, *The Concept of State Policy in the religious affairs for 2014-2020 of the Kyrgyz Republic*, available at <http://www.religion.gov.kg/ru/Концепция%20государственной%20политики%20Кыргызской%20Республики%20в%20религиозной%20сфере%20на%202014-2020%20годы.pdf>, as translated in Franco Galdini, “Islam in Kyrgyzstan: growing in diversity,” *Open Democracy*, October 22, 2015, available at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/franco-galdini/islam-in-kyrgyzstan-growing-in-diversity>.

¹¹ “Central Asia: Islam and the State,” ICG: 25.

¹² US Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001*, available at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/10319.pdf>.

extremism and/or terrorism to discredit opponents and crack down on any dissent. The example of the banned organization Hizb ut-Tahrir is emblematic in this regard. Emmanuel Karagiannis found that:

[I]n the past senior officials have been quick to lump Hizb ut-Tahrir together with the IMU or other terrorist groups, in an attempt to discredit it. This merely undermines government propaganda as there have been several occasions when officials initially blamed Hizb ut-Tahrir for terrorist or other violent attacks, but were subsequently forced to retract. Such statements undermine trust in the authorities and boost those who claim that the government manipulates the issue.¹³

With the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States and the launching of the GWOT shortly thereafter,¹⁴ a subject such as Central Asian Islam—which had theretofore been all but ignored in Western circles—suddenly came into sharp focus.¹⁵ To support the war effort in Afghanistan, the US leased the Manas airbase out of Manas International Airport in Bishkek in December 2001, placing Kyrgyzstan firmly within the GWOT.

Meanwhile, the discourse emanating from elites in Washington and other Western capitals appeared to identify Muslim populations as more at risk of radicalization—and, by association, violent extremism and terrorism—than any other population due to a toxic, yet ill-defined, Islamic or Islamist ideology. In other words, rather than governments directing themselves towards an analysis of the complex set of political, economic and historical factors leading to the September 11 attacks, the idea was taking root that Muslims are “robots programmed only by Islam. Some [experts thus] supported ‘deradicalisation’ programmes, to install new software into the robots’ minds.”¹⁶

Such assertions resonate widely with Central Asian elites, as the authorities find validation of their repressive policies in the discourse of the fight against terrorism. In the words of Carnegie Centre’s Aleksey Malashenko, “[r]adical Islam long ago became instrumental and has been systematically used by secular leaders [in Central Asia] to achieve their own goals.”¹⁷ As we shall see, in spite of its relatively free political and media environment, Kyrgyzstan is no exception to this trend.

With the creation of the so-called Islamic State in parts of Iraq and Syria in 2014, the debate on the extent to which Central Asian Muslims are vulnerable to radicalization, and how many have left the region to join ISIS, is all the rage. Broadly, one can identify two opposing camps in the discussion: on the one side, government officials and Western security experts tend to believe that the threat of radicalization is real, widespread and growing;¹⁸ on the other, a few renowned Central Asia academics argue that most of the evidence for it is thin,

¹³ Emmanuel Karagiannis, “Political Islam and Social Movement Theory: The Case of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan,” *Religion, State and Society* 33 no. 21 (January 2007), 140, available at http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/rss/33-2_137.pdf.

¹⁴ US Department of State, *The Global War on Terrorism: The First 100 Days*, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/s/ct/rls/wh/6947.htm>.

¹⁵ Vitaly V. Naumkin, “Militant Islam in Central Asia: The case of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan,” Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Working Paper Series, July 1, 2003, available at <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/7ch968cn#page-1>.

¹⁶ Nir Rosen, “Al Qa’eda was always a fringe group with no roots in the Arab world,” *The National*, May 6, 2011, available at <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/al-qaeda-was-always-a-fringe-group-with-no-roots-in-the-arab-world#page1>.

¹⁷ Aleksei Malashenko, “Islam, Politics, and the Security of Central Asia,” *Russian Politics and Law* 42, no.4 (2004): 7.

¹⁸ See, for example, “Syria Calling: Radicalization in Central Asia,” International Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing #72 (2015), available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/syria-calling-radicalisation-central-asia>.

circumstantial and, crucially, largely provided by government sources whose perception may be biased by their secular outlook and political-economic interests.¹⁹

This paper positions itself on the latter side of this debate with Kyrgyzstan as a case study. It presents two empirical cases where the Kyrgyz authorities claimed to have eliminated two terrorist groups, namely Jaysh al-Mahdi in 2010-11 and ISIS in 2015-16, broaching the numerous and substantial contradictions in the official story regarding these events. It then proceeds to place them within a frame of political economic circumstances prevalent in Kyrgyzstan at the time, indicating the multiplicity of ways in which elites were poised to benefit domestically and internationally from exaggerating the threat of terrorism.

The Strange Case of Jaysh al-Mahdi

The year 2010 was a momentous one for Kyrgyzstan. The country experienced massive political unrest that culminated in the overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who had himself come to power on the heels of the Tulip Revolution five years earlier. While the latter had been a largely bloodless affair, in 2010 events spun out of control. On April 7, protesters clashed with security forces in Bishkek and stormed the presidential office building, known as the White House. By the end of the day, 86 protesters had been killed and scores more wounded.²⁰

With the political arrangements in the country shattered, the opposition—which formed an Interim Government (IG) on April 8 with the promise of holding elections within the following six months—struggled to fill in the power vacuum created by the previous administration’s collapse. Already in May, episodes of violence had shaken the southern provinces of Jalal-Abad and Osh, where the IG’s grip seemed tenuous at best, exposing a deepening rift between the country’s northern and southern Kyrgyz elites vying for control. Meanwhile, the leaders of the sizable Uzbek minority tried to navigate the fluid situation in order to better their community’s standing after years of marginalization under Bakiyev.

Amid the instability, violence flared up once again in June 2010, when during four fateful days Kyrgyz and Uzbeks fought in the streets of Osh and Jalal-Abad cities and provinces, in what became known as the Osh Events. The result was devastating: “hundreds of people [were] killed and thousands injured; thousands of commercial assets and homes [were] burnt to the ground; and approximately 400,000 people [were] internally displaced or made refugees in neighboring Uzbekistan.”²¹

High volatility remained a feature of daily political life in Kyrgyzstan for the rest of 2010, even as it held a constitutional referendum on June 27 and landmark parliamentary

¹⁹ John Heathershaw and David W. Montgomery, “The Myth of Post-Soviet Muslim Radicalisation in the Central Asian Republics,” *Chatham House Research Paper* (2014), available at https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20141111PostSovietRadicalizationHeathershawMontgomery.pdf; see also author’s interview with Alisher Khamidov, Associate at the Central Asia Program at George Washington University, Bishkek, February 27, 2015.

²⁰ Anna Matveeva, “Violence in Kyrgyzstan, Vacuum in the Region: the case for Russia-EU joint crisis management,” LSE Civil Society & Human Security Research Unit Working Paper (2011), available at <http://www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/CSHS/pdfs/workingPapers/violenceInKyrgyzstan.pdf>; and “Kyrgyzstan capital bloodied, looted and chaotic after overthrow of Bakiyev,” *The Guardian*, April 8, 2010, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/apr/08/kyrgyzstan-revolt-over-kurmanbek-bakiyev>.

²¹ Franco Galdini, “The June 2010 ‘events’ four years on: past, present, future,” *Central Asia Security Policy Briefs* #15 (August 2014), available at http://www.osce-academy.net/upload/file/Policy_Brief_15.pdf. The best day to day account on the May-June events remains “A chronicle of violence: The events in the south of Kyrgyzstan in June 2010 (Osh Region),” *Freedom House Report 2* (2012), available at https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Report_2_12_ENG_net.pdf.

elections on October 10. With elections failing to produce a clear winner, a ruling coalition was agreed to only by mid-December. A government was effectively installed at the start of 2011 under the new constitution.²²

The series of smaller-scale incidents that marked this transition period, therefore, fit the pattern of intra-elite conflict and instability beleaguering the country after the April revolution and the Osh Events.²³ Among them was an explosion that rocked the Sports Palace in Bishkek on November 30, which was at the time was “the venue for the emotional trial of those accused of ordering and executing violence during Kyrgyzstan’s April 7 uprising”—namely President Bakiyev and several members of his family and entourage—as well as for “eight low-ranking members of the country’s special forces Alfa group.”²⁴ Following the blast, the trial was adjourned to a later date.

The authorities’ reaction to this event, however, was confused and confusing for the general public, with different officials issuing contradictory statements on the identity of the perpetrators. At a press conference the same day then-Security Council Secretary Marat Imankulov blamed supposed ‘nationalist-separatists’ for the Sports Palace attack, adding that it “aimed at disrupting the court proceedings on the April 7 events.” Imankulov linked the explosion to a series of other incidents that took place in Bishkek and Osh during the previous week, including the arrest of a group suspected of preparing several attacks in the country, stating that they were “links in one chain.”²⁵

This echoed the declarations of Minister of Interior Zarylbek Rysaliev, who at another press conference the previous day, November 29, had stressed that the people arrested had no connection to international terrorist organizations: “This group is of a purely nationalist-separatist persuasion. [These] people were planning to carry out terrorist attacks in Bishkek, Osh and other southern localities with the aim of destabilizing the socio-political situation.”²⁶ In post-Osh Events parlance, the ‘nationalist’ and ‘separatist’ labels apply to two categories of people only: pro-Bakiyev elements and the Uzbek minority, who conventional wisdom has turned into the main culprits for the May-June violence, as elaborated below.

Imankulov was immediately contradicted by the deputy head of the State Committee for National Security (GKNB), Kolbai Musayev, who alleged that the perpetrators were linked to the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).²⁷ The former

²² Erica Marat, “Kyrgyz Parliament Forms New Coalition,” *The Jamestown Foundation*, December 16, 2010, available at http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=37287&no_cache=1#.V5SKJmUhZAY.

²³ For a complete list of these incidents, most of which will be blamed on Jaysh al-Mahdi, see Appendix 1.

²⁴ David Trilling, “Confusion Reigns After Fresh Violence in Kyrgyzstan,” *EurasiaNet*, November 30, 2010, available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62464>.

²⁵ “Nationalist-separatists are behind the explosion in Bishkek and the incident in Osh – Security Council of the Kyrgyz Republic (Za vzryvom v Bishkeke i intsidentom v Oshe stoyat national-separatisty – Sovbez KR),” *Kyrtag*, November 30, 2010, available at http://kyrtag.kg/news/za_vzryvom_v_bishkeke_i_intsidentom_v_oshe_stoyat_natsional_separatisty_sovbez_kr/; and “M. Imankulov: Nationalist-separatists are behind the explosion in Bishkek and the incident in Osh (M.Imankulov: Za vzryvom v Bishkeke i intsidentom v Oshe stoyat national-separatisty)”, *AKIpress*, November 30, 2010, available at <http://kg.akipress.org/news%3A297091>.

²⁶ Daniyar Karimov, “A series of terrorist attacks prevented by security forces in Kyrgyzstan had been prepared by a nationalist-separatist group (Seriya teraktov predotvrashennyh silovikami v Kyrgyzstane, gotovilas gruppoi natsionalisticheski-separatistskogo tolka)”, *24*, November 29, 2010, available at <http://arch.24.kg/investigation/87751-seriya-teraktov-predotvrashennyx-silovikami-v.html>.

²⁷ Bektur Iskender, “Explosion next to Bishkek’s Sports Palace, some people lightly wounded (Vozle bishkekского dvortsa sporta progremel vzryv, est slegka ranenye)”, *Kloop*, November 30, 2010,

a splinter of the latter, both groups are active in Afghanistan and are classified as terrorist organizations in Kyrgyzstan.

No concrete proof of the connection between international terrorism and the happenings in Kyrgyzstan was provided, but it quickly became obvious that the authorities had settled on the terrorism explanation, though the origin of the threat morphed from international to internal—again with little corroborating evidence. In the following weeks, GKNB Chairman Keneshbek Dushebaev went on a media offensive, claiming that terrorists wanted “to turn the Central Asian region into a blazing torch of destabilization for the entire world” and that “a serious terrorist threat hangs over Kyrgyzstan.”²⁸

Speaking at a press conference on December 29, Dushebaev toed the IJU line. By January 17, 2011, however, in another meeting with the press he revealed for the first time the existence of a new home-grown terrorist group, Jaysh al-Mahdi (JM), responsible for most of the attacks that took place between September 2010 and January 2011. He added that two JM members had been killed and eleven captured, while three remained on the run.²⁹ Much had happened in the intervening weeks, including visits from top US officials to Kyrgyzstan, host of the strategic Manas air base.³⁰ The following paragraphs illustrate the internal and external incentives that prompted the discourse at the top of the country’s security apparatus to align so quickly with the GWOT, by immediately referring to the Afghanistan-based IMU and IJU, while pointing out the deep contradictions marring the official narrative on JM.

Enter JM

Dushebaev was never shy to controversy. In June 2010, he made headlines for alleging that “relatives of former president Kurmanbek Bakiyev conspired with Islamic militants to destabilize southern Kyrgyzstan.”³¹ He produced no evidence to support his claims, which were nonetheless reproduced almost verbatim in the final report of the National Commission of Inquiry (NIC) into the Osh events:

[T]he nationalist leaders of the Uzbek community, [who]—considering that the current situation in the country may allow them to achieve their objectives—began to artificially put an emphasis on the national question, involving in their activity large masses of people. These efforts ultimately coincided with the wishes of President Bakiyev and his supporters, namely to severely destabilize the situation in the country.³²

These episodes indicate how a pattern of blaming instability in the country on national and international co-conspirators—the Bakiyevs, the nationalist/separatist Uzbeks, and terrorist

available at <http://kloop.kg/blog/2010/11/30/srochno-vozle-bishkekskogo-dvorca-sporta-programel-vzryv-est-ranenye/>.

²⁸ Alisher Khamidov, “Kyrgyzstan: Officials Making a Terrorism Case of Just Sowing Panic?” *EurasiaNet*, December 22, 2010, available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62624>; and “K. Dushebaev: a serious terrorist threat hangs over Kyrgyzstan (K. Duishebaev: Nad Kyrgyzstanom visit serioznaya terroristicheskaya ugroza),” *AKIpress*, December 29, 2010, available at <http://kg.akipress.org/news:309731>.

²⁹ “Kyrgyz Security Chief Blames Terrorist Group For Recent Bombings,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 17, 2011, available at http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyzstan_bombings_dushebaev/2278858.html.

³⁰ Olga Dzyubenko, “U.S. vacates base in Central Asia as Russia’s clout rises,” *Reuters*, June 3, 2014, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-kyrgyzstan-usa-manas-idUSKBN0EE1LH20140603>.

³¹ Deirdre Tynan, “Kyrgyz Provisional Government Alleges Bakiyev-Islamic Militant Link,” *EurasiaNet*, June 24, 2010, available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/61401>.

³² “Kyrgyzstan: Report of National Commission of Inquiry in the June events has been published (Kyrgyzstan: Opublikovano zakluchenie natsionalnoi komissii po rassledovaniyu v yunskih sobytiy),” *Fergana News*, January 20, 2011, available at <http://www.fergananews.com/article.php?id=6871>.

groups—without providing evidence was established, in an attempt to shield the IG from criticism while it struggled to consolidate power following the April revolution and the Osh Events.

The JM narrative fits neatly into this pattern. “The IG needed something [that allowed] the public to let off steam in order to avoid a big conflagration,” a former GKNB official with almost two decades in the service told the authors on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal.³³ “Those days, the situation was explosive. Every day we heard news about acts of banditry and looting, as well as raiding of properties belonging to the Bakiyevs being redistributed among the elites. People held the IG responsible for the constant insecurity,” he added.

In other words, the specter of terrorism served to divert attention from the IG’s failures in re-establishing law and order to the issue of national security. By first blaming the IMU, the GKNB linked to the discourse of the GWOT while reviving very real memories of the group’s summer 1999 “hit-and-run battles with the Kyrgyz army in the [south-western] Batken region.”³⁴ Then, JM brought the threat even closer to home. The former GKNB official, however, questions the group’s very existence, pointing out the service’s botched job in handling the flow of information as possible proof that JM may be a fabrication: “From the start, it was obvious that no proper research had been done to establish who these people were. Imankulov and Dushebayev kept contradicting each other; there was no coherence in their statements.”

Holes in the Official Story about JM

Whether fabricated or not, the official version regarding JM creates more questions than it gives answers. Between the first arrests at the end of December 2010 and Dushenbayev’s press conference on January 17, 2011, a total of 21 people were initially implicated in the JM case, according to data provided by the GKNB. Two were killed by Alfa Special Forces during an operation to capture them in the village of Arashan, some 25 kilometers south of Bishkek.³⁵ This inaugurated a worrying “shoot first, ask questions later” trend within the Kyrgyz security services in terrorism-related searches.

Equally worrying is the fact that the majority of those detained—13 people—were tortured to extract a confession, some so savagely that they had to be hospitalized after the first interrogation. In order to exert psychological pressure on the accused, in some instances the GKNB resorted to threatening to harm their family members. Lawyers were not allowed to attend interrogation sessions for up to two months from the date of arrest.³⁶ Again, this established a pattern of torture of terrorism suspects as well as impunity for perpetrators that continues to this day.³⁷

³³ Authors’ interview with former GKNB official, Bishkek, May 2016. All subsequent quotes are taken from this interview.

³⁴ Roger D. Kangas, “Uzbekistan,” in *Power and Change in Central Asia*, ed. Sally Cummings (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

³⁵ “Kyrgyz Interior Minister says 2 terrorists killed, 1 detained in special operation outside Bishkek,” *AKIpress*, January 6, 2011, available at https://akipress.com/_en_news.php?id=41798.

³⁶ For a complete list of all people implicated at different times with JM, ISIS, or both, as well as other information about them, e.g. torture, please see Appendix 2.

³⁷ The problem is pervasive in the country and goes beyond terrorism suspects. A 2015 Human Rights Council report during Kyrgyzstan’s Universal Periodic Review expressed concerns about the ‘widespread practice of torture and ill-treatment, in particular for the purpose of extracting confessions, [the] failure of Kyrgyzstan to investigate fully the many allegations [thereof], [and the] use of forced confessions as evidence in courts.’ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Universal Periodic Review – Kyrgyzstan*, January 19, 2015, available at <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/KGSession21.aspx>.

The mother of one of the detainees, Edil Abdrakhmanov, described how GKNB investigators “put a bag on [her son’s] head, stunned him with electroshock, kicked him. [Edil] fainted during interrogation, he wasn’t fed for three days, his blanket was taken away.” The wife of another, Bakyt Kenzhegulov, recounted that GKNB operatives had threatened her husband, saying he would not see her again. When she met him, she “noticed traces of blood on his head, swelling of the hands, [he] looked very tired [and] could not stand on his own. To [my] question: ‘Did you beat him,’ the investigator cynically replied: ‘A little bit.’”³⁸

The cases of Abdrakhmanov and Kenzhegulov are particularly relevant as they both participated in the April revolution and, during the Osh events, were among a group entrusted by the IG with delivering humanitarian help to the population of Osh city.³⁹ When this information emerged, it created a media sensation but failed to force the IG to investigate the allegations of torture.⁴⁰ In an open letter to Interim President Roza Otunbayeva and then Prime Minister Almazbek Atambayev, their relatives—along with the family members of others accused in the JM case—asked for truth and justice.⁴¹ To this day, their call remains unanswered, as does the question of how two revolutionaries and IG-anointed activists with no previous criminal record became terrorists in the space of just a few months.⁴²

Even more questions surround a December 20 YouTube video showing five masked, armed men declaring the creation of JM and swearing an oath of allegiance to Taliban leader Mullah Omar.⁴³ The GKNB refers to the video for the first (and last) time during the same press release in which it announces having disrupted JM, on January 17, 2011.⁴⁴ However, while the name Mahdi clearly refers to Shia theology, the armed militants offer their allegiance to the Taliban, a Sunni movement.⁴⁵ Religious education in Kyrgyzstan suffers from a lack of funding and qualified cadres, so it is common for people to have a very superficial knowledge of Islam. But the man sitting in the far left corner, who speaks first in the video, is a native Arabic speaker who should presumably know the difference between Sunni and Shia.⁴⁶ This fact raises further doubts about the official version of events, which

³⁸ Saniya Sagnayeva, Human rights organisation Memorial, unpublished manuscript, 2011. The document was given to the authors by one of the lawyers for the defence.

³⁹ “MK-Asia: Were the terrorist attacks in Kyrgyzstan planned by the government? (MK-Aziya: Terakty v Kyrgyzstane splanirovalo pravitelstvo?),” *Fergana News*, February 2, 2011, available at <http://www.fergananews.com/article.php?id=6889>.

⁴⁰ Renat Shamsuddinov, “The Interim Government’s Myths about the terrorism threat in Kyrgyzstan (Mify Vremennogo Pravitelstva ob ugroze terrorizma v Kyrgyzstane),” *Kyrgyzskoe kompromat TV*, January 26, 2011, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPE6AZh-Q7Q>.

⁴¹ “Open letter by the relatives of those citizens who have been arrested on the suspicion of terrorism (Obrashenie rodstvennikov grazhdan, zaderzhannyh po podozreniyu v terrorizme,” *AKIpress*, February 14, 2011, available at http://mnenie.akipress.org/unews/un_post:614.

⁴² Abdrakhmanov and Kenzhegulov are not the only one who participated in the April 7 revolution, including the storming of the Presidential building in Bishkek, and ended up being involved as defendants in the JM’s case. See Sagnayeva, Memorial’s unpublished manuscript, 2011.

⁴³ “Pledging Bay’at to Amir-ul-Momineen Mullah Mohammad Omar Mujahid,” March 20, 2011, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HtxWWZKcVfE>.

⁴⁴ “Kyrgyzstan: The head of the State Committee for National Security has named the extremist organisation behind the recent high-profile crimes (Kyrgyzstan: Glava GKNB nazval ekstremistkuyu organizatsiyu, stoyashuyu za poslednimi gromkimi prestupleniyami),” *Fergana News*, January 17, 2011, available at <http://www.fergananews.com/news.php?id=16222>.

⁴⁵ In Shia eschatology, it is believed that ‘the son of the eleventh imam [is] alive, that he [is] in “occultation,” and that he [is] to reappear as mahdi (Ar. “the Guided One”) at “the end of time.”’ See “Islam in Iran vii. the concept of Mahdi in Twelver Shi’ism,” *Encyclopedia Iranica*, available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/islam-in-iran-vii-the-concept-of-mahdi-in-twelver-shiism>.

⁴⁶ The authors asked three unrelated native Arabs to listen to the video and give their opinion about the first speaker. While differing in their identification of the militant’s place of origin, all were positive that he is someone whose mother tongue is Arabic.

mentions only Kyrgyz and one Russian as JM members, but no Arabs.⁴⁷ Given the backlash from the families of the accused at the time, why didn't the GKNB clearly identify the masked men among the detained suspects as a way of putting suspicions to rest?

Finally, in an interview with one of the authors, now retired Major General Imankulov pointed out:

[O]n the notebooks of JM's members we found that they had visited extremist websites. They had exchanged emails with an al-Qaeda branch, though I cannot recall in which country. The latter had written back that they would recognize Jaysh al-Mahdi if they showed their muscle, i.e. carried out attacks. This is the reason why they struck.⁴⁸

What better platform to claim responsibility for the bombing of Bishkek synagogue in September and the Sports Palace in November than a YouTube video announcing the group's creation? This would have certainly given the newly-established group credibility in the eyes of foreign jihadists. Instead, the video contains nothing beyond the usual jihadist platitudes of joining the fight against infidels and living by the law of Allah in Arabic, Russian and Kyrgyz. Interestingly, Imankulov confirmed that the Sports Palace attack was only meant to create panic, rather than cause civilian casualties.⁴⁹ He described "seeing the bomb used. First of all, it was placed in a manhole, in order to severely limit the explosion. If you want to blow something up, you don't put the explosive in a hole. Second, it didn't have any shards to hurt people."

A terrorist group that avoids civilian casualties is certainly an anomaly. Still, none of the attacks allegedly mounted by JM resulted in deaths: the Bishkek synagogue was empty at the time an explosive device went off in the courtyard, while the car bomb outside a Bishkek police station failed to detonate.⁵⁰ The GKNB claims that the group killed a citizen and three policemen in two other separate incidents, but while criminal, these acts hardly account for terrorism.

Who Benefits?

⁴⁷ "Kyrgyz Security Chief Blames Terrorist Group For Recent Bombings," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 17, 2011, available at http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyzstan_bombings_duishebaev/2278858.html.

⁴⁸ Author's interview, Bishkek, July 7, 2016. All subsequent quotes are taken from this interview.

⁴⁹ This was also reported at the time of the incident. "Secretary of the Security Council: Kyrgyzstan tightens security measures to preserve public order," *Trend*, November 30, 2010, available at <http://en.trend.az/casia/kyrgyzstan/1789603.html>.

⁵⁰ The Bishkek synagogue was attacked once before during the April revolution, suggesting that this incident may be also linked to the political instability prevailing in the country at the time. Moreover, Bishkek Police spoke of a device being hurled into the courtyard by a single person, which contradicts Abrakhmanov's 'confession' of a more sophisticated plan executed with Kenzhegulov's help. Memorial reports that Abrakhmanov's 'confession' reads like 'the testimonies recorded under dictation of the investigators and tailored to fit terrorism charges, which are found in dozens of fabricated criminal case in different CIS countries.' See "Explosive device hurled into empty synagogue courtyard in Kyrgyzstan," *San Diego Jewish World*, September 12, 2010, available at <https://sdjewishworld.wordpress.com/2010/09/12/explosive-device-hurled-into-empty-synagogue-courtyard-in-kyrgyzstan/>; "Bishkek Police Investigate Attack On Synagogue," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 10, 2010, available at http://www.rferl.org/content/Bishkek_Police_Investigate_Attack_On_Synagogue/2154212.html, Urmat Kenzhesariyev, "Do the explosions in the capital have a Caucasus trail? (Vzryvy v stolitse imeyut kavkazskii sled?)," *Vecherny Bishkek*, n.d., available at <http://members.vb.kg/2011/01/19/territ/1.html>, and Sagnayeva, Memorial's unpublished manuscript, 2011.

At the January 17, 2011 press conference, GKNB Chairman Dushebayev made the sensational claim that JM intended to strike at the US Embassy in Bishkek and the Manas Transit Centre, the US-leased air base at Manas International Airport. The statement, which resonated in international media,⁵¹ coincided with a meeting between PM Atambayev and US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Susan Elliott. During the discussion, “Elliott suggested that both sides cooperate in tackling drug trafficking, terrorism and religious extremists in Kyrgyzstan.”⁵² Dushebayev had just put the country on the map in the GWOT. Apart from the many inconsistencies, at the time intelligence company STRATFOR picked up on the suspicious timing of the press conference, arguing that:

[I]t is in the interests of the Kyrgyz authorities to exaggerate, and perhaps even fabricate, the threat of terrorism in the country. [B]ut the true nature of violence in Kyrgyzstan is more likely linked to the simmering ethnic tensions than transnational terrorist activity.

[A]lso, claims by security officials that the detained terrorist group would deploy a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device first at a police station and then at the Manas air base is, to say the least, an odd and unusual tactic for such a group to employ.

[U]nder the current circumstances, it is much more likely that the Kyrgyz government and security forces are manipulating the terrorist threat in order to justify their own crackdowns and to get outside support from countries like the United States, as well as Russia.⁵³

It worked. By the end of 2011, freelance journalist Joshua Kucera reported:

According to the most recent State Department budget documents justifying military aid to [Central Asia], [a]ssistance to Kyrgyzstan “will be used to provide equipment to military forces to enhance their ability to protect the country from terrorist threats. The US Government will work directly with Kyrgyz Security Forces to identify shortfalls in equipment necessary to complete the security mission.”⁵⁴

US training of Kyrgyzstan’s security services grew exponentially over the following two years up to 2014, when the Manas air base closed in accordance with the timetable to end NATO’s presence in Afghanistan.⁵⁵ Although some of the aid must be viewed as a way of currying favor with the Kyrgyz authorities, given the strategic importance of Manas air base to the US military effort in Afghanistan, terrorism was also a top US priority in the region in the context of the GWOT, as Susan Elliott pointed out. The subject had been raised at talks between then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Interim President Otunbayeva during the former’s visit to the country on December 2, 2010—incidentally two days after the Sports

⁵¹ Richard Orange, “Militants ‘planned to blow up US embassy and airbase’ in Kyrgyzstan,” *Telegraph*, January 18, 2011, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/kyrgyzstan/8266848/Militants-planned-to-blow-up-US-embassy-and-airbase-in-Kyrgyzstan.html>.

⁵² “Kyrgyzstan, US agree on resuming bilateral consultations,” *Trend*, January 18, 2011, available at <http://en.trend.az/casia/kyrgyzstan/1813276.html>.

⁵³ “Kyrgyzstan Plays Up the Terrorist Threat,” *Stratfor*, January 17, 2011, available at <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/kyrgyzstan-plays-terrorist-threat>.

⁵⁴ Joshua Kucera, “Central Asia: US Special Forces Help Train Praetorian Guards,” *EurasiaNet*, December 19, 2011, available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64736>.

⁵⁵ US Department of State, *Volume I Section III-V - South Central Asia*, 2012, available at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/213456.pdf>; US Department of State, *Volume I Section IV-V – South Central Asia*, 2013, available at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/230217.pdf>.

Palace bombing—and again when the latter met with US President Barack Obama at the White House in March 2011.⁵⁶

But for the IG and the security apparatus, the main benefits of inflating the terrorism menace were domestic. In the same post, STRATFOR indicates:

[While] violence has gone down considerably in Kyrgyzstan, [the] country has been in a continued state of instability. Low-level protests continue almost daily, and the country's transition [under] President Roza Otunbayeva has been far from smooth. The Kyrgyz government and security forces, therefore, have played up the threat of terrorism and extremism in order to justify security crackdowns and exert control over the restless country.⁵⁷

In the wake of the April revolution, the GKNB elite Alfa units were a demoralized force facing trial—and public shame—for killing and injuring hundreds of civilians in an unsuccessful attempt to quell a popular revolt. In a way, the whole service was being tried for failing to protect national security, especially after the pogroms that rocked southern Kyrgyzstan in summer 2010.

By promoting a narrative of a growing terrorism threat, the GKNB and their special units rebranded themselves as the vanguard defense of the nation in the fight against extremism, an image that endures today. In the words of the former GKNB official, “you should remember that almost 3,000 people were in attendance at the Sports Palace for the April 7 events trial. Most were relatives of victims; emotions ran sky-high. It was Alfa Special Forces on trial. The explosion helped to shift the mood.” In this context, the IG's political survival was guaranteed, along with the transfer of power and resources to the new elites. The cost to Kyrgyzstan, however, has been significant, as little in the way of the promised reforms has been achieved. In Crisis Group's Deirdre Tynan's words:

[T]he new interim government said it would deliver reform, accountability, and an end to the staggering corruption of the Bakiyev era. It said it would dismantle the schemes that concentrated political and economic power in the hands of a clannish few. It did not. Under any circumstances, this would be a massive undertaking, but President Almazbek Atambayev, elected to the post in October 2011, has not overseen a real effort to combat political or economic corruption. The spoils have simply been redistributed.⁵⁸

Trial and Sentence

On July 19, 2013, after more than two years of trial, 13 people were convicted on terrorism charges in connection with the JM case. Abdrakhmanov, Kenzhegulov and a third suspect, Daniyar Kadyraliev, were given life in a very strict corrective colony along with property

⁵⁶ “Remarks With President Otunbayeva After Their Meeting,” US Department of State, December 2, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/12/152274.htm>; “Readout of the Meeting of the President and National Security Advisor with Kyrgyzstani President Roza Otunbayeva,” The White House: Office of the Press Secretary, March 7, 2011, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/07/readout-meeting-president-and-national-security-advisor-kyrgyzstani-pres>.

⁵⁷ “Kyrgyzstan Plays Up the Terrorist Threat,” *Stratfor*, January 17, 2011, available at <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/kyrgyzstan-plays-terrorist-threat>.

⁵⁸ Deirdre Tynan, “Tracing Political Circles in Kyrgyzstan,” *International Crisis Group Blog*, April 6, 2016, available at <http://blog.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/2016/04/06/tracing-political-circles-in-kyrgyzstan/>.

confiscation; the other defendants received sentences between four and 23 years in detention.⁵⁹

According to two lawyers for the defense who knew the presiding judge, Ernis Chotkorayev, the judge had come under tremendous pressure to deliver a guilty verdict. Both confirmed in separate interviews that the judge is well known for being just and impartial, a rarity in Kyrgyzstan. On the day of the sentence, however, one of the lawyers went to see him in his office and remarked:

[H]is attitude had totally changed. He threw a fax paper on the table. It was a letter from the General Prosecutor's Office Council on the Selection of Judges, in which they were questioning his conduct in the trial. "What am I supposed to do?" he told me. "I want to help and I saw what kind of a mess this trial has been, but I cannot do it now. I don't want to lose my job."⁶⁰

The end of the trial should have signaled the end of the JM case. After all, already in 2011 the GKNB had "claimed to have eliminated the group [Jaysh al-Mahdi], which conducted several small-scale attacks in late 2010."⁶¹ Despite this, the Kyrgyz government and security apparatus have continued using the threat of terrorism to divert attention from more pressing issues affecting the general population, securing their survival at the helm while silencing dissent. In 2015, JM resurfaced along with the Islamic State (ISIS), and once again, the official version of events presented major contradictions, bringing into serious question its credibility.

A Strange Case Becomes Even Stranger: JM and Mr. ISIS

On July 16, 2015, explosions and heavy gunfire ripped through Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek. News spread fast about an on-going special operation mounted by the GKNB Alfa elite forces with police support in the city's southern district. Speaking to the media immediately afterwards, GKNB spokesperson Rakhat Sulaimanov explained that the security services had neutralized an "international terrorist group preparing to launch attacks in Bishkek," adding that an investigation was still under way to ascertain the group's identity and the location of the attacks.⁶² The details came the following day, however, when Sulaimanov revealed that six members of the Islamic State had been eliminated and seven more captured in the course of two parallel operations in the capital. Security services had dealt a pre-emptive blow to the group, as it emerged that it was preparing to bomb the July 17 mass prayer gathering to mark the end of Ramadan in Ala-Too Square in Bishkek, as well as the Russian Kant airbase some 20 kilometers east of the city.⁶³

The announcement reverberated widely in local and international media, particularly as it was the first time that an ISIS cell had been allegedly discovered not only in Kyrgyzstan, but

⁵⁹ "Kyrgyzstan: Sentence issued in the case of the "Jaysh al-Mahdi" terrorist group in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan: V Bishkeke vynesen prigovor po delu o terroristicheskoi gruppe "Jayshul Mahdi")," *Fergana News*, July 19, 2013, available at <http://www.fergananews.com/news.php?id=20977>.

⁶⁰ Author's interviews with lawyers for the defence, Bishkek, February 9 & 11, 2016.

⁶¹ US Department of States, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2011 – Kyrgyzstan*, July 31, 2012, available at <http://www.refworld.org/docid/501fbcaf.html>.

⁶² "State Committee for National Security conducts counter- terrorism operation in Bishkek (GKNB provodit kontrterroristicheskuiu operatsiiu v Bishkeke)," July 16, 2016. YouTube video, 1:28:07, posted by *Kloop*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9mDPUXEE38>. For Sulaimanov's statement, see 1:21:10 ff.

⁶³ "Kyrgyzstan Claims Neutralized IS Members Planned Attacks," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 17, 2015, available at <http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyzstan-islamic-state-clashes/27134456.html>.

in the wider Central Asian region.⁶⁴ Sulaimanov claimed that the ISIS terrorists “had received finances from Syria to buy chemical components for explosives,” and that “[s]ignificant amounts of cash, seven assault rifles, five pistols, and a large number of grenades were found’ in their hideout,”⁶⁵ along with 500 kilograms of ammonium nitrate.⁶⁶ The latter doesn’t feature in the short video the GKNB released as supporting evidence to these allegations, which instead shows an immaculate ISIS flag lying on the floor among various tools, weapons and ammunitions.⁶⁷

What’s in a Story?

Very soon, the official version of events began to exhibit substantial cracks. First of all, it transpired that at least four of the six ‘ISIS terrorists’ were actually criminals well known to law enforcement agencies. For instance, the supposed cell leader Janbolat Amanov (or Amirov, depending on the source)⁶⁸ was a Kazakh citizen wanted by police in Kyrgyzstan for escaping from prison, where he was serving a three-year sentence for forgery and illegal border crossing.⁶⁹

More significantly, among the killed was Tariel Dzhumagulov, also known as Tokha, a prominent member of the post-Soviet underworld whose brushes with the law included “disorderly conduct, robbery, possession of firearms and extortion,” as well as membership of Kamchybek Kolbayev’s organized crime group.⁷⁰ In 2012, the US Department of the Treasury had put Kolbayev under sanctions:

Kamchybek Kolbayev acts for or on behalf of the Brothers’ Circle [crime syndicate] by serving as [their] “overseer” for its Central Asian activities, including narcotics trafficking. In June 2011, President Obama identified Kolbayev as a significant foreign narcotics trafficker under the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act. Kolbayev is wanted in Kyrgyzstan for organized crimes and crimes involving the use of weapons/explosives, and organized/transnational crime.⁷¹

⁶⁴ “State Committee for National Security: Killed “militants” are members of the “Islamic State” (GKNB: Ubitye “boeviki” – chleny “Islamskogo gosudarstva),” *Kloop*, July 17, 2015, available at <http://kloopkg.wpengine.com/blog/2015/07/17/gknb-ubitye-boeviki-chleny-islamskogo-gosudarstva-foto/>; Olga Dziubenko, “Kyrgyz security police say they foiled two Islamic State attacks,” July 17, 2015, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-kyrgyzstan-security-idUSKCN0PR12520150717>.

⁶⁵ “Kyrgyzstan Claims Neutralized IS Members Planned Attacks,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 17, 2015, available at <http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyzstan-islamic-state-clashes/27134456.html>.

⁶⁶ Anton Lyamar, “Anti-terror,” 24, August 12, 2015, available at <http://www.eng.24.kg/community/176694-news24.html>.

⁶⁷ “Elimination of terrorists in Bishkek (Likvidatsiia terroristov v Bishkeke),” *Bulbul*, July 20, 2015, available at <http://bulbul.kg/video:37266>.

⁶⁸ “Among the terrorists killed in Kyrgyzstan, two were from Kazakhstan (Sredi ubitykh v Kyrgyzstane predpolagaemykh terroristov bylo dva kazakhstantsa),” *Kazakhstan Today*, July 21, 2015, available at https://www.kt.kz/rus/crime/sredi_ubitykh_v_kirgizstane_predpolagaemih_terroristov_bilo_dva_kazakhstanca_1153607512.html.

⁶⁹ “Kyrgyzstan: Gunfight in the Bishkek city centre (Kyrgyzstan: Perestrelka v tsentre Bishkeka),” *Central Asia TV News*, June 26, 2015, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SMWEInGsGFo>.

⁷⁰ “July 20: ISIS terrorist was well-known criminal figure (Den’ 20 iuliia: terroristom IGIL okazalsia vsem izvestni “chernyi”),” *For.kg*, July 21, 2015, available at <http://www.for.kg/news-332456-ru.html>.

⁷¹ “Treasury Imposes Sanctions on Key Members Of The Yakuza And Brothers’ Circle Criminal Organizations,” US Department of the Treasury, available at <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1430.aspx>.

The presence of one more Kazakh citizen among the dead suggests that the 'ISIS cell members' may instead have been part of a criminal cartel involved in cross-border activities. This appeared to be confirmed during a September 7 press conference held by the relatives of the people killed during the special operation, frustrated at the fact that the GKNB wouldn't return the bodies of their loved ones as Kyrgyz law allows in terrorism cases.⁷²

One family member declared that "our children aren't terrorists, they prayed five times a day, so how could they blow up their co-religionists in Ala-Too square? Yes, they were bullies in their youth, but not terrorists." Another added: "Had they announced that [our children] were members of an organized crime group, we wouldn't have said anything. But they are calling them terrorists. This is unacceptable."⁷³ This is in line with the JM case, where most of the accused were also conservative Muslims. This appears to be all the evidence the authorities need to start using the terrorism buzzword, automatically connecting outward expressions of religiosity with an imminent threat. It so happens that this narrative allows the elites to exaggerate (or fabricate) the threat and benefit from it.

During the July 16 operation, the firefight set an aging poplar tree alight,⁷⁴ causing a raging fire that burnt five buildings in the area to the ground, including the alleged terrorists' safe house. An international journalist who arrived at the scene that same evening commented:

[A]s to them discovering anything intact, the very suggestion is beyond ridiculous. The fire was very extensive and lasted well into the night, so for them to find a pristine [ISIS] flag, not to speak of [a] large amount of flammable material still in one piece was plainly a flagrant falsehood.⁷⁵

But even if we take the GKNB's allegations on the weapons and explosives found in the hideout at face value, things still don't add up. As Noah Tucker reports:

[T]he influential political science scholar Aleksandr Knyazev, a strong defender of Russian interests in [Kyrgyzstan], mocked the claims that a few career criminals could have possibly planned to "attack an enormous Russian air base with a couple of sacks of fertilizer" and cited it as one of many examples of regional governments manipulating public perceptions of the ISIS threat for political purposes, including efforts to convince Russia to grant more military aid.⁷⁶

The only thing Knyazev misses is that Russia is far from a passive player in Central Asia, as explained below.

⁷² See Article 36 of the Law 'On Countering Terrorism' of the Kyrgyz Republic. This may be in breach of international law, namely of Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights concerning 'the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.' On the case of Osama bin Laden and how 'funeral rites are also closely related to the exercise of the right to one's religion and belief,' see Helen Duffy, "Case Study II: Osama bin Laden – 'Justice Done'?" in *The 'War on Terror' and the Framework of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 772.

⁷³ "Parents of the killed in a special operation in Bishkek claimed their children were criminals but not terrorists (Roditeli ubitykh v khode spetsoperatsii v Bishkeke lits zaiavili, chto ikh deti byli "blatnymi," no nikak ne terroristami," *Eurasia News (Novosti Evrazii)*, September 7, 2015, available at <http://eurasnews.ru/kirgiziya/родители-убитых-в-ходе-спецоперации-в/>.

⁷⁴ "Kyrgyzstan: Authorities Present Their Case for Claimed IS Cell," *EurasiaNet*, July 21, 2015, available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/74326>.

⁷⁵ Author's email exchanges with international journalist who requested anonymity due to the sensitivity of the case. May 4 & July 11, 2016.

⁷⁶ Noah Tucker, "Public and State Responses to ISIS Messaging: Kyrgyzstan," *CERIA Brief #14* (February 2016), available at <http://centralasiaprogram.org/blog/2016/02/16/public-and-state-responses-to-isis-messaging-kyrgyzstan/>.

Finally, as with the Osh events, a connection was established with ousted President Bakiyev. A few days after the operation, former member of Parliament for the Ak Jol party and Bakiyev ally Maksat Kunakunov was arrested amid much fanfare with the accusation of having provided weapons to the ISIS cell. According to the authorities, Kukakunov was the mastermind behind a far-fetched plan to destabilize the situation in Kyrgyzstan, with the ISIS cell members poised to orchestrate a series of robberies to fund future terrorist attacks.⁷⁷

In parallel to evidence-thin theories of collaboration between the Bakiyevs and extremist elements to wreak havoc in the country, as already described in part 2 in connection to the Osh events, the authorities have for years pushed the idea of an alliance between criminal and terrorist groups. In May 2012, Radio Azattyk reported how:

Kyrgyzstan's special services have noticed that in recent years, instead of criminal gangs in the conventional sense, new [criminal] groups are formed on the principles of religious organizations. According to them, this can be clearly seen in the extremist organization Jaysh al-Mahdi.⁷⁸

As it so often happens, little to no evidence of this 'new trend' and how JM fits in it was presented. The authorities may have had in mind the fact that a number of convicts appear to convert to Islam while serving time, as a way of escaping drug addiction and finding solace in religion. The alleged JM leader Sovetbek Islamov, killed in an Alfa Special Forces operation on January 5, 2011, was one such convert, as confirmed by retired Major General Imankulov who hails from the same town as Islamov and knew him as a drug addict and petty criminal before he became religious while in jail.⁷⁹

But the direct link the authorities draw between outward expressions of religiosity and extremism explains more about the former's biases than Muslim citizens' propensity to violent radicalization. More importantly, while the link between extremist groups and the criminal underworld has not been proven, the symbiotic relation between the latter and much of the establishment in Kyrgyzstan has been a known entity for years.

Coincidentally, also in May 2012 the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC) published an extensive report entitled "Opiate Flows Through Northern Afghanistan and Central Asia." In it, UNDOC argues that while "there are no observed direct connections between extremist groups and drug trafficking, [...] [similar to Afghanistan] large parts of the political and law enforcement establishment in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are seriously undermined by the involvement in the drug trade."⁸⁰

Media reports are rife with allegations of collusion between the upper echelons of politics and the underworld of criminality in Kyrgyzstan, including under current President Atambayev.⁸¹ The ice-thin case about ISIS's presence in the country in collusion with crime

⁷⁷ "Maksat Kunakunov is ISIS sponsor in Kyrgyzstan (Maksat Kunakunov – sponsor IGIL Kyrgyzstana)," *KG TV*, July 20, 2015, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EKiAII5F2MU>.

⁷⁸ Kubanychbek Zholdoshev, "Haqqani Network has appeared in Kyrgyzstan (Set' Hakkani poiavilas' v Kyrgyzstane)," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 16, 2012, available at http://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_haqqani_terror/24582498.html.

⁷⁹ Author's interview, Bishkek, July 7, 2016.

⁸⁰ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Opiate flows through northern Afghanistan and Central Asia*, May 2012, available at http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/Afghanistan_northern_route_2012_web.pdf.

⁸¹ Anna Yalovkina, "Kyrgyz Politics Still Too Close to the Mob?" *Institute for War & Peace Reporting*, July 14, 2015, available at <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kyrgyz-politics-still-too-close-mob>; Vitaly Volkov, "Experts: Kyrgyz deputy PM is responsible for the top criminal figure[is release] (Eksperty: Kirgizski vitse-premier otvetit za vora v zakone)," *Deutsche Welle*, May 24, 2013, available at

bosses can serve as a useful way of averting attention from the authorities' possible links to the latter—but this isn't the only benefit of pushing the threat of terrorism in the country.

Who Benefits? Different Times, Same Strategy

Many developments occurred between the JM sentence and the special operation to crush ISIS in Bishkek. Internationally, attention had turned to the self-styled Islamic State, a monster that outgrew its predecessor al-Qaida in Iraq—itsself spawned from the chaos that followed the country's US-led invasion and occupation—by feeding on the collapse of central power in Syria to establish control over a vast territory straddling the two countries' northern border.⁸² Despite President Obama proclaiming the end of the GWOT,⁸³ the rise of ISIS has effectively meant that the fight against terrorism continues to this day, lending credence to the argument that the GWOT is indeed an 'endless war.'⁸⁴

Domestically, an important counterbalance to Russia's resurgent influence in the country and the region was lost with the US departure from the Manas Transit Centre in summer 2014. Russia had renewed its lease of Kant airbase for another 15 years in 2012, where it has since continued building up its military muscle in view of turning it "into the Central Asian base for the nascent joint air forces of the Collective Security Treaty Organization," or CSTO, a Moscow-dominated security outfit.⁸⁵ With Kyrgyzstan's accession to the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in August 2015, the country appears to be firmly within the Kremlin's sphere of influence.

The July 2015 special operation in Bishkek took place against a background of great uncertainty about the country's entry into the EEU, which at the time had been repeatedly postponed due to technical hurdles.⁸⁶ While the elites invested considerable political capital behind Kyrgyzstan's membership into the union,⁸⁷ opposition had been mounting against a project many perceived as Putin's brainchild to ultimately tie the country's future to Russia's. An International Republican Institute (IRI) poll in May 2014 found that "[s]upport for joining Russia's Customs Union [the EEU precursor] dropped 13 points from IRI's February 2013 poll, and is now supported by just less than half of respondents (49 percent). Twenty-one percent strongly disapprove of joining the union, up from just 10 percent."⁸⁸ Apart from a loss of sovereignty, resistance to EEU entry was growing in parallel to the escalation of the

<http://www.dw.com/ru/эксперты-киргизский-вице-премьер-ответит-за-вора-в-законе/a-16834762>.

⁸² Franco Galdini, "The IS Blowback," *Warscapes*, August 24, 2014, available at <http://www.warscapes.com/opinion/blowback>.

⁸³ Paul D. Shinkman, "Obama: 'Global War on Terror' Is Over," *U.S. News*, May 23, 2013, available at <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2013/05/23/obama-global-war-on-terror-is-over>.

⁸⁴ Glenn Greenwald, "The 'war on terror' – by design – can never end," *The Guardian*, January 4, 2013, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jan/04/war-on-terror-endless-johnson>; Chalmers Johnson, "America occupies the planet: The grim realities of our endless War on Terror," *Salon*, August 11, 2015, available at http://www.salon.com/2015/08/11/america_occupies_the_planet_the_steep_consequences_of_our_endless_war_on_terror_partner/.

⁸⁵ Joshua Kucera, "Russia Reinforces Air Base In Kyrgyzstan With New Attack Jet," *EurasiaNet*, December 9, 2014, available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/71266>.

⁸⁶ Catherine Putz, "Kyrgyzstan (Finally) Joins the Eurasian Economic Union," *The Diplomat*, May 22, 2015, available at <http://thediplomat.com/2015/05/kyrgyzstan-finally-joins-the-eurasian-economic-union/>.

⁸⁷ "PM: Kyrgyzstan integration in Eurasian European Union to trigger entrepreneurship," *TASS Russian News Agency*, September 21, 2015, available at <http://tass.ru/en/economy/822426>.

⁸⁸ "IRI Kyrgyz Poll: Support for Joining Russia's Customs Union Drops, Corruption Remains Pervasive Problem," International Republican Institute, May 14, 2014, available at <http://www.iri.org/resource/iri-kyrgyz-poll-support-joining-russia's-customs-union-drops-corruption-remains-pervasive>.

war in Ukraine. Putin's military adventurism caused concerns of a similar fate for Kyrgyzstan, as did the Russian economic downturn under the weight of Western sanctions imposed as a result of the Ukraine standoff.⁸⁹

Still, despite its vital importance, the subject was hardly debated and little information trickled down to the public on the pros and cons of accession.⁹⁰ Instead, people were subjected to a barrage of news on terrorism in general, and ISIS in particular, which had the effect of diverting public opinion from the very real issue of the EEU. While the media in Kyrgyzstan are freer than in neighboring countries, a 2008 study by the Danish NGO International Media Support (IMS) found that:

[J]ournalists in Kyrgyzstan know little about political extremism and terrorism. In crises situations, they often lack skills to tackle such issues. Therefore they habitually reproduce official statements without looking for an opportunity to supplement these with their own investigations or third party analysis and comments.⁹¹

And if the authorities in Bishkek are to be believed, Kyrgyzstan is facing a massive terrorism crisis.⁹² Speaking at a conference in November 2015, the Interior Ministry head of counter-terrorism alleged—apparently without irony—that the country had suffered 300 terrorist attacks in the first 10 months of 2015, the equivalent of one attack per day.⁹³ The hysteria peaked with the July special operation and remained sky-high until the close of the year, due to a spectacular prison break by alleged JM and ISIS terrorists and a two-week operation to apprehend them.⁹⁴

As was the case with JM, domestic priorities were paramount to the authorities' argument that they were fighting the enemy of the day in the GWOT, namely ISIS. The fact that the Kyrgyz government put forward the same line-up of co-conspirators allegedly behind the 2010 Osh events—criminal elements, terrorist groups and former Bakiyev associates—appears to confirm that they were preparing the ground for the upcoming October 2015 parliamentary elections.

Unsurprisingly, incumbent President Atambayev's electoral message was for voters to 'choose stability,'⁹⁵ the buzzword of his own Social Democratic party (SDPK) which he clearly favored in the elections.⁹⁶ At the same time, in the run up to October and following the July operation the President strove to present himself and the government as tough on terrorism

⁸⁹ Franco Galdini and Elyor Nematov, "Kyrgyzstan: Putin's Eurasian Economic Union and Its Discontents," *The Diplomat*, May 20, 2016, available at <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/kyrgyzstan-putins-eurasian-economic-union-and-its-discontents/>.

⁹⁰ Peter Leonard, "Kyrgyzstan Joins Eurasian Union, Takes Leap Into the Dark," *EurasiaNet*, August 7, 2015, available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/74591>.

⁹¹ "The examples of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: Political Extremism, terrorism, and media in Central Asia," International Media Support Report (August 2008), available at <https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/ims-political-extremism-kyrgyzstan-kazakhstan-2008.pdf>.

⁹² "Kyrgyzstan Says It Has Been Hit by 'Wave of Terrorism,'" *EurasiaNet*, December 11, 2015, available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/76516>.

⁹³ Franco Galdini, "Kyrgyzstan Is Manipulating the Threat of 'Terrorism' for Its Own Benefit," *Muftah*, February 11, 2016, available at http://muftah.org/kyrgyzstan-manipulating-terrorism-threat/#.V5o_kGUhZAY.

⁹⁴ This is the subject of the following sub-heading.

⁹⁵ "The presidential party has won in Kyrgyzstan (V Kyrgyzstane pobedila prezidentskaia partiia)," *Ozodlik*, October 5, 2015, available at <http://rus.ozodlik.mobi/a/27288427.html>.

⁹⁶ Olga Dzyubenko and Dmitry Solovyov, "Pro-Russian parties seen winning Kyrgyz parliamentary poll," *Reuters*, October 4, 2015, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-kyrgyzstan-election-idUSKCN0RY00320151004>.

or, in other words, as the candidates able to preserve stability.⁹⁷ The strategy worked and in the October 4 poll the SDPK won almost a third of all seats in the Jogorku Kenesh (JK), the Kyrgyz Parliament, becoming the country's most popular party.⁹⁸

More broadly, the election results were a victory for Moscow, as all parties re-elected to the JK were pro-Russian.⁹⁹ Russian media played an important role in promoting the idea of a growing terrorist threat in Kyrgyzstan, emanating from Afghanistan and ISIS. As Kyrgyzstan's political, economic and military patron, the Kremlin's interests coincided with those of the authorities in Bishkek in exaggerating the threat of terrorism to sideline discussions about the EEU and, crucially, present Russia as the country's main partner in the fight against the scourge of violent extremism.

The July 16 special operation and an October 11-12 prison breakout were given a great deal of attention in Russian language media, especially those targeting the audience in Kyrgyzstan.¹⁰⁰ This happened in parallel to coverage of Moscow's provision of increased anti-terrorism training and military hardware to their counterparts in Bishkek (and Central Asia), whether bilaterally or within the framework of the CSTO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).¹⁰¹ The media campaign reached a climax in 2016, when Rossiya TV channel aired a report entitled "Kyrgyzstan has become a 'factory of cadres' for ISIS," which featured the July 16 special operation in Bishkek.¹⁰²

So successful was Russia's rebranding as Kyrgyzstan's partner in the war on terrorism that by the end of 2015 a Eurasian Development Bank's annual survey indicated that 86% of the population in the country had a positive attitude towards Eurasian integration, the highest among EEU member states—a definite turnaround from previous trends.¹⁰³ Aside from the obvious benefits for elites in Moscow and Bishkek, however, people in Kyrgyzstan were being jailed and/or killed on very dubious charges of belonging to JM and ISIS, their families torn asunder and their relatives bereft of even the possibility of grieving for their loved ones at their funeral, given the state policy of not returning their bodies.

If the GKNB amateurism can explain some inconsistency in the official line, the extent of the contradictions marring it is so pervasive to warrant a conscious decision by the authorities to go the extra mile to push the terrorism story. This became even more evident as events

⁹⁷ "Kyrgyzstan steps up a fight against terrorism and extremism," *Mir 24*, September 10, 2015, available at <http://mir24.tv/news/politics/13230851>.

⁹⁸ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Kyrgyz Republic: Parliamentary Elections 4 October 2015*, January 28, 2016, available at <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kyrgyzstan/219186?download=true>.

⁹⁹ Charles Recknagel, "Kyrgyz Voters Choose Russia," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 5, 2015, available at <http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyz-elections-voters-choose-russia/27289387.html>.

¹⁰⁰ A search on the Kremlin's media branch Sputnik.kg in Russian for news items where the July 16 special operation and the October 11-12 prison escape had been mentioned gave as a result 65 and 149 articles, respectively, between summer 2015 and January 2016.

¹⁰¹ See "Russia Plans Anti-Terrorism Drills Involving CSTO, SCO Countries," *Sputnik*, October 1, 2015, available at <http://sputniknews.com/military/20151001/1027826231/Russia-Plans-Anti-Terrorism-Drills-Involving-CSTO-SCO-Countries.html>; Viktor Litovkin, "Expert: CSTO focuses on the fight against terrorism (Ekspert: ODKB sosredotachivaetsia na bor'be s terrorismom)," *Sputnik*, December 21, 2015, available at <http://sputnik.by/analytics/20151221/1019168619.html>; "Russia Actively Rearming Kyrgyz Army Against Daesh Threats," *Sputnik*, December 23, 2015, available at <http://sputniknews.com/military/20151223/1032198201/russia-kyrgyzstan-army-shoigu.html>.

¹⁰² Eldiyar Arykbaev, "Russian TV channels called Kyrgyzstan a factory of cadres for ISIS (Telekanaly Rossii nazvali Kyrgyzstan kuznitsei kadrov dlia IGIL)," *Kloop*, February 25, 2016, available at <http://kloop.kg/blog/2016/02/25/telekanaly-rossii-nazvali-kyrgyzstan-kuznitsej-kadrov-dlya-igil/>.

¹⁰³ Eurasian Development Bank, *Integration Barometer of the EDB 2015*, October 16, 2015, available at http://www.eabr.org/r/research/centre/projectsCII/integration_barometer/?id_16=48993.

unfolded after some JM and ISIS detainees mounted a prison break in October 2015. In the weeks and months that followed, the authorities fused and confused JM and ISIS in a back and forth that would be comical if it hadn't involved so many deaths.

Coming Full Circle: How JM Became ISIS, and Vice-versa

On the night of October 11-12, 2015, JM detainees and ISIS inmates mounted an escape from a maximum security prison (SIZO 50) near Bishkek, killing four officers of the State Prison Service (GSIN) in the process. While five were captured shortly afterwards, a massive manhunt was organized to apprehend the four still at large. Two weeks later, six were dead and three faced charges of, inter alia, terrorism and breaking out of prison to join ISIS in Syria.

Life-sentence JM detainee Bakyt Kenzhegulov was among the group of five who were almost immediately recaptured. Along with two others, he died of a heart attack on October 20, 2015—or that is the official story.¹⁰⁴ Retired Colonel and GSIN veteran Ernst Isaev saw the three as they were transported to a prison hospital hours before dying: “they had been beaten so badly that they could hardly stand on their legs. GSIN operatives had just enough time to take them to hospital where they died from the beatings.”¹⁰⁵

The other two in the group of five were convicts Muzaffar Urinov and Bolot Kurbanakhunov, one serving life for murder and the other for robbery and murder, respectively.¹⁰⁶ But in a pattern similar to the July 16 special operation against a criminal-gang-turned-ISIS-cell, by the time they appeared in court the two faced charges of terrorism and wanting to join ISIS in Syria, which they denied.¹⁰⁷ In June 2016, both were given another life sentence, despite reports that they may have been tortured.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ “Escape from SIZO 50: all of a sudden, one of the escapees who was detained the same night died (Pobeg iz SIZO-50: V SIZO-50 skoropostizhno skonchalsia odin iz sbezhavshikh, kotorogo v tu zje noch' zaderzhali),” *AKIpress*, October 20, 2015, available at <http://svodka.akipress.org/news:144150/>; “Escape from SIZO 50: a third recaptured detainee, Muratbek Zhumaliev, has died (Pobeg iz SIZO-50: Skonchalsia tretii zaderzhannyi beglets Muratbek Zhumaliev),” *AKIpress*, October 21, 2015, available at <http://svodka.akipress.org/news:144182?from=kgnews&place=impnews>.

¹⁰⁵ Author's interview, Bishkek, February 11, 2016.

¹⁰⁶ For Urinov, see “Murderer of taxi drivers (Ubiitsa taksistov),” *Chalkan TV*, February 10, 2012, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YexcZlGj_nM. For Kurbanakhunov, see “4 siblings and their father are suspected of committing bank robberies and murdering two policemen (4 rodnykh brata i ikh otets podozrevaiuitsia v sovershenii ograblenii bankov i ubiistve dvukh militsionerov),” *AKIpress*, October 20, 2005, available at <http://kg.akipress.org/news:22910?place=nowread>.

¹⁰⁷ Rinat Shamsutdinov, “Defendants in the trial for the escape from SIZO 50 declared they did not intend to go to Syria (Podsudimye v sude po delu o pobege iz SIZO-50 zaverili, chto ne sobiralis' v Siriyu),” *AKIpress*, May 27, 2016, available at http://24.kg/obschestvo/32616_podsudimye_v_sude_po_delu_o_pobege_iz_sizo-50_zaverili_chno_ne_sobiralis_v_siriyu/.

¹⁰⁸ “Escape from SIZO 50: E. Abdrakhmanov, M. Urinov, B. Kurbanakhunov sentenced to life (Pobeg iz SIZO #50: E. Abdrakhmanova, M. Urinova, B. Kurbanakhunova prigovorili k pozhiznennomu lisheniui svobody),” *AKIpress*, June 29, 2016, available at <http://svodka.akipress.org/news:825731>; Iana Baiburina, “State Prison Service and Main Directorate to Combat Organised Crime beat the landlady, in whose apartment an escapee from SIZO 50 was hidden (GSIN i GUBOP izbili khoziaiku kvartiry, gde skryvalsia beglets iz SIZO #50),” *Knews*, June 9, 2016, available at <http://knews.kg/2016/06/09/delo-begletsov-iz-sizo-50-hozyajku-kvartiry-gde-skryvalsya-beglets-izbili-sotrudniki-gsin-i-gubop/>.

Among the four on the run was Azamat Musuraliev, who was being investigated for theft,¹⁰⁹ but whom the authorities suddenly accused of being a JM member following the prison escape.¹¹⁰ According to the Kyrgyz Ministry of Interior, Musuraliev was killed upon recapture as he resisted arrest.¹¹¹ A military expert who studied a video and pictures of his dead body,¹¹² however, pointed out that all 8 or 9 bullet impacts “entered from the back. It seems that the victim has also a wound in the back of his head.”¹¹³ This may indicate an execution, in line with the shoot-first and ask-questions-later mentality mentioned in relation to JM previously.

Another escapee, Altynbek Itibayev, also remained at large, when a “special operation to liquidate him”¹¹⁴ was mounted and pictures of his bullet-ridden body started appearing online.¹¹⁵ Itibayev had been arrested during the anti-ISIS operation on July 16,¹¹⁶ and yet authorities now accused him of being “an active member of the banned group JM,” who had been involved in the bombing of the Sports Palace in November 2010.¹¹⁷ There is only one glitch in this story: from April 2009 to October 2013 Itibayev was held in detention by the GKNB for murder and could not possibly be roaming around Bishkek planning terrorist attacks.¹¹⁸

Moreover, while in 2010-11 one could argue that the name JM was given with no specific reference to Shia eschatology, this could not be the case any longer in 2015, as the State Commission for Religious Affairs had published a report clearly identifying JM as a Shia

¹⁰⁹ “Escape from SIZO 50: A. Musuraliev was held on charges of stealing evidence on a criminal case for looting (Pobeg iz SIZO #50: A. Musuraliev prohodil po delu o krazje materialov ugovalnogo dela po maroderstvu),” *Gezitter*, October 20, 2015, available at http://waw.gezitter.org/society/44537_pobeg_iz_sizo-50_a_musuraliev_prohodil_po_delu_o_kraje_materialov_ugolovnogogo_dela_po_maroderstvu/.

¹¹⁰ “9 people escaped from SIZO 50, three officers of State Prison Service are killed (Iz SIZO-50 sovershili pobeg 9 chelovek, tri sotrudnika GSIN ubity)”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 12, 2015, available at <http://rus.azattyk.org/a/27301104.html>.

¹¹¹ “Escape from SIZO 50: Azamat Musuraliev shot during the arrest, Interior Ministry (Pobeg iz SIZO-50: Azamat Musuraliev zastrelen pri zaderzhanii, – MVD),” *AKIpress*, October 20, 2015, available at <http://svodka.akipress.org/news:144145>.

¹¹² “Azamat Musuraliev shot during arrest (Azamat Musuraliev zastrelen pri zaderzhanii),” *AKIpress*, October 20, 2015, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_3nWOBxv0Q. For pictures of Musuraliev’s body, see Marat Uraliev, “AzamatMusuraliev shot in Sokuluk area (Azamat Musuraliev ubit v Sokulukskom raione),” *Zanoza*, October 20, 2015, available at http://zanoza.kg/doc/326436_v_sokylykskom_rayone_ybili_sbejavshogo_iz_sizo_50_azamata_my_syralieva.html.

¹¹³ Author’s email exchange with military expert, March 21, 2016.

¹¹⁴ “Special operation for liquidation of fugitive prisoner finished, Itibayev killed – Interior Minister,” *AKIpress*, n.d., available at <http://akipress.com/news:567153/>.

¹¹⁵ “Operation to eliminate fugitive prisoner in Bishkek, Oct. 22,” *AKIpress*, October 23, 2015, available at <http://akipress.com/photo:357/>.

¹¹⁶ Makhinur Niiazova, “Identities of alleged terrorists killed during GKNB special operation revealed (Stali izvestny lichnosti predpolagaemykh terroristov, ubitykh i zaderzhannykh v khode spetsoperatsii GKNB),” *24*, July 20, 2015, available at http://24.kg/kriminal/16464_ia_24kg_stali_izvestnyi_lichnosti_predpolagaemyih_terroristov_ubit_yih_i_zaderjannyih_v_hode_spetsoperatsii_gknb/.

¹¹⁷ Authors’ observations in Bishkek following the SIZO 50’s escape; see also “Profile of an escapee: How Itibaev was freed by court decision (Dos’e begletsy: Kak Itibaev resheniem suda okazalsia na svobode),” *Sputnik*, October 21, 2015, available at <http://ru.sputnik.kg/incidents/20151021/1019495373.html>.

¹¹⁸ This was confirmed to one of the authors by Itibayev’s brother Meder and his lawyer Kadizha Zazazova. Author’s interviews, Bishkek, February 26 & March 3, 2016, respectively. Open sources confirm this: Kybanychbek Mukashev, “So who shot Sanzharbek Kadyraliev? (Tak kto zhe zastrelil Sanzharbeka Kadyralieva?)” *Vecherny Bishkek*, April 13, 2011, available at http://members.vb.kg/2011/04/13/panorama/5_print.html.

organization.¹¹⁹ How, then, could someone like Itibayev be first accused of being part of a Sunni radical organization like ISIS, only to be linked a few months later to a Shia millenarian movement? The authorities never felt it necessary to answer this question.¹²⁰

Finally, life-sentence JM detainees Daniyar Kadyraliev and Edil Abdrakhmanov managed to escape. Kadyraliev was later killed upon arrest. When Abdrakhmanov was recaptured, he was found lying on the ground in the middle of an empty field. He had been shot in the leg and there was an ISIS flag next to him. Without apparent irony, one media outlet thus titled its report: “JM group’s leader caught near Bishkek with ISIS flag.”¹²¹ While the media obviously failed to scrutinize the authorities’ ever-more improbable claims, during the trial the latter proceeded to accuse Abdrakhmanov—someone who had been sentenced to life for membership in the JM terrorist organization two years prior—of wanting to join ISIS in Syria.¹²² Itibayev’s problem applies to Abdrakhmanov, only in reverse: the first went from ISIS to JM, while the second moved from JM to ISIS.

It does not end here. In December 2015 media reports spoke of two further ‘terrorists’ eliminated in yet another special operation. Linking to official sources from the Kyrgyz authorities, including the GKNB, the suspects were identified as members of Tokha’s group (i.e. an ISIS cell),¹²³ as members of JM,¹²⁴ or both.¹²⁵ It is unsurprising, then, that in a press release dated June 29, 2016, the Ministry of Interior claimed to have neutralized a four-member JM cell involved in “armed assaults to support the activities of the group, as well as the recruitment of citizens for ISIS.”¹²⁶

¹¹⁹ State Commission of Religious Affairs (SCRA), *State Policy in Religious Affairs and Main Religious Currents in Kyrgyzstan*, 2015, available at http://www.religion.gov.kg/ru/metodi4ka_ru.pdf.

¹²⁰ Several emails to the GKNB asking for an explanation specifically on this point went answered. Author’s email to GKNB, July 2016.

¹²¹ “Jaysh al-Mahdi group’s leader caught near Bishkek with ISIS flag (Glavaria gruppirovki “Zhaisul’ Makhdi poimali pod Bishkek s flagom IG),” *Mir 24*, October 22, 2015, available at <http://mir24.tv/news/society/13417216>.

¹²² Rinat Shamsutdinov, “Edil Abdrakhmanov: We wanted to give money to Road Patrol Service officers, but they did not approach us (My hoteli dat’ sotrudnikam DPS den’gi, no oni tak i ne podoshli k nam),” *24*, May 27, 2016, available at http://24.kg/obschestvo/32615_edil_abdrakmanov_myi_hoteli_dat_sotrudnikam_dps_dengi_no_oni_tak_i_ne_podoshli_k_nam/.

¹²³ “Liquidated militants possibly involved in murder of district policeman (Likvidirovany boeviki, vozmozhno, prichastnye k ubiistvu chastkovogo),” *Vecherny Bishkek*, December 11, 2015, available at http://www.vb.kg/doc/330806_likvidirovany_boeviki_vozmojno_prichastnye_k_ybiystvy_ychastkovogo.html.

¹²⁴ Kanykei Manasova, “In Bishkek, witnesses point to the involvement of two militants liquidated the previous day in the murder of one policeman (V Bishkeke svideteli ukazali na prichastnost’ k ubiistvu militsionera dvukh likvidirovannykh nakanune boevikov),” *24*, December 11, 2015, available at http://24.kg/obschestvo/24551_v_bishkeke_svideteli_ukazali_na_prichastnost_k_ubiystvu_militsionera_dvuh_likvidirovannykh_nakanune_boevikov/.

¹²⁵ The International Crisis Group reports: Kyrgyzstan, January 4, 2016. Two unnamed suspects shot dead by Special Forces 10 Dec in Bishkek after opening fire on officers; suspects said to be responsible for 19 Nov murder of Bishkek policeman, declared to be members of extremist group Jaysh al-Mahdi linked to Nov 2010 bomb blast in Bishkek and to July 2015 anti-terrorist operation in Bishkek. Available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/crisiswatch/crisiswatch-database.aspx?CountryIDs=%7BE357B437-385B-4246-995E-53B525830C7E%7D>.

¹²⁶ Ministry of Interior, “Directorate n. 10 of the Ministry of Interior: Criminal cell of religious-extremist organisation, with a radical outlook of Salafi-Takfiri orientation, has been neutralised (10 GU MVD: obezvrezhena prestupnaia gruppya religiozno-ekstremistskoi organizatsii, imeiushchaia radikal’nyi vsgdliad takfiristsko-salafitskogo tolka),” June 29, 2016, available at <http://mvd.kg/index.php/rus/mass-media/all-news/item/1989-10-gu-mvd-obezvrezhena-prestupnaya-gruppya-chlenov-religiozno-ekstremistskoj-organizatsii-imeyushchaya-radikalnyj-vzglyad-takfiristsko-salafitskogo-tolka>. Emphasis added.

In their desire to be seen at the forefront of the fight against terrorism domestically and internationally, the authorities have come full circle. JM has been fused and confused with the current enemy of the day in the GWOT, ISIS, with no concern for coherence, truth and, most importantly, human life.

Conclusion

The paper explored two specific cases in which the Kyrgyz authorities claimed to have identified and neutralized two terrorist groups operating in the country, namely Jaysh al-Mahdi—an allegedly home-grown formation bent on destabilizing the country between 2010 and 2011—and an Islamic State cell—aiming to wreak havoc in Kyrgyzstan during the summer of 2015. It subjects these allegations to critical scrutiny by identifying the contingent political-economic circumstances under which the purported terrorism threat appeared in the country, while perusing an array of open source material, as well as eyewitness accounts and in-depth interviews with family members, lawyers, human rights defenders, former security officers and politicians.

The official line in both cases suffers from such glaring contradictions that it casts serious doubt on the professionalism of some Kyrgyzstan's institutions, especially in law enforcement and intelligence, as well as on the Kyrgyz government's sincerity in exposing the truth. This point is reinforced by the widespread torture of suspects to extract confessions and the pressure on the judiciary to deliver guilty sentences, not to speak of the elimination of many of those implicated in these cases.

In both instances, the available evidence suggests that the authorities have grossly exaggerated the threat of terrorism in the country, in order to benefit domestically and internationally from the perception of being at the forefront in the fight against it. By consciously adopting the language of the GWOT, the Kyrgyz elites have managed to curry the favor of different international patrons at different times—the US in 2010-11, Russia in 2015—and receive military aid, especially in the field of counter-terrorism.

But it is domestically that the main gains from manipulating the terrorism threat have been observed. In 2010-11, the country was rocked by political instability and the new interim government's grip on power was fragile at best. The JM case offered the new elites the political cover to crackdown on dissent, marginalize and silence political opponents, and establish control. The strategy worked, and roughly the same intra-elite, power-sharing arrangements remain in place to this day.

In 2015, the ISIS menace served the purpose of sidelining political opponents and presenting the incumbent President's Social Democratic party as the party of stability in view of upcoming parliamentary polls, while silencing debate on the key political issue of Kyrgyzstan's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union. Once again, the strategy delivered the desired outcomes, as the SDPK triumphed in the elections. Power at the helm was consolidated, while by the end of the year most people's confidence in the EEU had bounced back as Russia burnished its image of a reliable partner for the country in the fight against terrorism.

The consequences for the country, however, have been dismal. The desire for radical change that spurred the April revolution was soon lost to intra-elite political angling, and little has been achieved since in terms of reforms. Instead, one predatory political class has been substituted by another. Torture has remained pervasive, as has the use of confessions extracted under torture in court and impunity for perpetrators. Judicial independence has been further weakened. The frequency with which the security apparatus appeared to shoot and kill suspects instead of apprehending them is further confirmation that the rule of law

has been suspended for certain categories of citizens, eroding the legitimacy of state authority in the eyes of the general population. Ominously, as Kyrgyz government officials and their foreign sponsors concur on the fact that terrorism is a top policy priority for the country, and the region,¹²⁷ the foreseeable future seems to hold more of the same for the population of Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia.

¹²⁷ “Kyrgyz Parliament Approves New Prime Minister,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 13, 2016, available at <http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyz-parliament-approves-new-prime-minister/27672380.html>; Catherine Putz, “Security Tops German Foreign Minister’s Agenda in Central Asia,” *The Diplomat*, March 30, 2016, available at <http://thediplomat.com/2016/03/security-tops-german-foreign-ministers-agenda-in-central-asia/>.

Appendix 1. List of incidents attributed to/linked to JM by the Kyrgyz authorities, 2010-11

Year: 2010

When	Where	What	Damage/injuries/deaths
June 3 & 10	Tokmok town	Two bombings	Three women and one child injured by shards of glass
September 9	Bishkek city	Jewish synagogue attack	Destruction of property 217,732 KGS (~3, 250 USD) paid in compensation
November 29	Osh city	Osh clashes allegedly with IMU militants	Five militants reportedly killed
November 30	Bishkek	Bombing at Bishkek Sports Palace	Damage to the building, no victims 64,000 KGS (~900 USD) paid in compensation
Night of December 19 & 20	Bishkek	Reconnaissance operation opposite the US Embassy in Bishkek, murder	One citizen (A. Alferov) murdered as he allegedly witnessed the group's reconnaissance
December 24	Sokuluk town	Burglary and car-jacking	20,000 USD and a Land Rover are stolen
December 25	Bishkek, Ministry of Interior	Botched bombing with IED placed inside the Land Rover stolen the night before	No damage, no victims

Year: 2011

When	Where	What	Damage/injuries/deaths
January 4	Bishkek	Murder of three policemen in the city's 8th micro-district	Three policemen (S. Jeenbekov, A. Sulaimanov and P. Ysmanov) murdered 500,000 KGS (~7,500 USD) paid in compensation to each policeman's family
January 5	Arashan/Besh-Kungei village	Special operation by GKNB Alfa elite forces	2 alleged JM members (Sovetbek Islamov and Azim Sultankulov) killed

			1 alleged JM member (Edil Abdrakhmanov) captured 1 Alfa officer killed
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Appendix 2. People accused of being part of JM, ISIS or both by the Kyrgyz authorities, 2010-16

Year: 2010						
#	Name	Date of arrest	Torture	JM, ISIS, or both	Sentence	Date of release/ Current Status
1	Aibek Korgonbekov	December 27, 2010	Yes	JM	8 yrs	Released on August 20, 2015 Left the country
2	Azim Sultankulov			JM		Killed upon arrest, January 5, 2011
3	Bakyt Zainiddinov	December 24, 2010	Yes	JM	No	Released with no charges (date unknown)
4	Iigilik Usekeyev	December 27, 2010	Yes	JM	22 yrs	In prison
5	Khairat Saliev			JM, ISIS		On the run Declared dead 'while fighting in Syria' by the authorities. Distant relative confirmed to authors he is alive and living abroad
6	Kazybek Usekeyev	December 27, 2010	Yes	JM	No	Released with no charges (date unknown)
7	Maksat Tuitukov	December 24, 2010	Yes	JM	No	Released with no charges (date unknown)
8	Maratbek	December 27,	Yes	JM	22 yrs	In prison

	Chekirokoyev	2010 January 19, 2011 (second time)				
9	Murat Doolotkaziev	December 27, 2010	Yes	JM	23 yrs	In prison
10	Sovetbek Islamov			JM		Killed upon arrest, January 5, 2011
11	Yntymak Bektursunov	December 24, 2010	Yes	JM	No	Released with no charges (date unknown)

Year: 2011

#	Name	Date of arrest	Torture	JM, ISIS, or both	Sentence	Date of release / Current Status
1	Akbarali Khatamov	January 11, 2011		JM	23 yrs	In prison
2	Altynbek Itibayev	January 17, 2011	Yes	ISIS, JM		Killed upon recapture on October 22, 2015, after escaping from SIZO 50
3	Bakyt Kenzhegulov	January 4, 2011	Yes	JM	Life	Died of alleged heart attack while in custody on October 20, 2015, after being immediately recaptured following his escape from SIZO 50
4	Damirbek Batyrbashiyev	January 19, 2011		JM	4 yrs	Released on June 11, 2015
5	Duishonbek	January 14, 2011		JM	4 yrs	Released (date

	Turdaliyev					unknown)
6	Edil Abdrakhmanov	January 5, 2011	Yes	JM, ISIS	Life	In prison
7	Ruslan Dootkulov	September 26, 2011	Yes	JM	23 yrs	In prison
8	Saidzhafar Asirov	January 8, 2011	Yes	JM	23 yrs	In prison

Year: 2012

#	Name	Date of arrest	Torture	JM, ISIS, or both	Sentence	Date of release / Current Status
1	Daniyar Kadyraliev	February 7, 2012	Yes	JM	Life	Killed upon recapture on October 16, 2015, after escaping from SIZO 50
2	Kubanychbek Medetbekov	August 7, 2012	N/A	JM	7 yrs	Released on June 11, 2015

Year: 2015

#	Name	Date of arrest	Torture	JM, ISIS, or both	Sentence	Date of release / Current Status
1	Adimanas Kurbanbaev	July 16, 2015		ISIS		Under investigation
2	Aman Arystanov			ISIS		Killed during special operation in Bishkek on July 16, 2015
3	Azamat	August 5, 2015		JM	Still under	Killed upon

	Musuraliev				investigation	recapture on October 20, 2015, after escaping from SIZO 50
4	Bekmamatuu Mirslan	July 16, 2015		ISIS		Under investigation
5	Tariel Dzhumagulov			ISIS		Killed during special operation in Bishkek on July 16, 2015
6	Erkinbek Kadyrov	July 16, 2015		ISIS		Under investigation
7	Kanatbek Itibayev			ISIS		Killed during special operation in Bishkek on July 16, 2015
8	Orynbasar Nurpazilov			ISIS		Killed during a special operation in Bishkek on July 16, 2015
9	Turdubek Chonmuraev			ISIS		Killed during special operation in Bishkek on July 16, 2015
10	Zhanbolat Amanov			ISIS		Killed during special operation in Bishkek on July 16, 2015
11	Muzaffar Urinov	Sentenced to 19 yrs and life for murder in 2012		now ISIS	Given another life sentence	In prison after being immediately recaptured following his escape from SIZO 50
12	Bolot Kurbanakhunov	Sentenced to life in 2005 for robbery and		now ISIS	Given another life sentence	In prison after being immediately

		murder				recaptured following his escape from SIZO 50
13	Name unknown			ISIS, JM		Killed during special operation in Bishkek on December 10, 2015
14	Name unknown			ISIS, JM		Killed during special operation in Bishkek on December 10, 2015
Year: 2016						
#	Name	Date of arrest	Torture	JM, ISIS, or both	Sentence	Date of release / Current Status
1	Altynbek Zhumagaziev	April, 2016		Fin supp to ISIS	Under investigation	Detained
2	Baktybek Zhumataev	April, 2016		Fin supp to ISIS	Under investigation	Detained
3	Bakytbek Batyrkanov	April, 2016		Fin supp to ISIS	Under investigation	Detained
4	Erkinuulu Sanzhar	April, 2016		Fin supp to ISIS	Under investigation	Detained
5	Erkinbek Kadyrov	April, 2016		Fin supp to ISIS	Under investigation	Detained

6	Sovetbek Isaev	April, 2016		Fin supp to ISIS	Under investigatio n	Detained
7	Ulan Niiazbekov	April, 2016		Fin supp to ISIS	Under investigatio n	Detained
8	Kutmanbek uulu Baisalbek	June 16, 2016		JM, ISIS	Under investigatio n	Detained
9	Beknazar Mamytov	June 16, 2016		JM, ISIS	Under investigatio n	Detained
10	Elaman Smanbekov	June 16, 2016		JM, ISIS	Under investigatio n	Detained
11	Aibek uulu Erlan	June 16, 2016		JM, ISIS	Under investigatio n	Detained