

# **FIGHTING FOR SOMEONE ELSE'S CAUSE: WHAT FAMILIES OF KIRGIZ MILITANTS IN ISIS SAY. AN EMPIRICAL VIEW**

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## **Abstract**

This article is about a survey of the opinions of families of Kirgiz militants in ISIS concerning the motivations of their relatives who joined Daesh<sup>1</sup> directly or through Islamic Movement of Kazakhstan, (which pledged allegiance to Islamic State and fought for Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan). It is based on the results of a field work done by the author in January 2015 and also relies on open national and international sources. The main hypothesis is that there is no universal motive concerning the decision of these young people, rather certain empirical factors are identified that impacted the individual decisions of the militants and migrants. Special attention is devoted to the participation of women. Among females, on an individual level, some additional motives could be found such as: sentimental relations, the wish to have a home and family, and the quest for realization of their own Muslim identity as they see and understand it.

*Key words: ISIS, Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz militants in Islamic State, women*

## **Radicalization and terrorism in Kyrgyzstan**

On the afternoon of Saturday July 25, 2015, the Islamic state published a "Message to the people of Kyrgyzstan" on YouTube. It lasted nearly nine minutes, during which time an unidentified man spoke in Kirgiz with subtitles in Russian. In the left angle of the screen, the logo of Furat media, a Daesh TV channel aimed at a Russian speaking audience, was seen. After six hours the video was removed by YouTube administrators. Without bloody and violent scenes, the video called the citizens of this small central Asian country to leave their fatherland and to join ISIS, arguing that in Kirgizstan people commit a great sin by living "according to fictional human laws and rules, such as democracy." (Баяз, 2015)

It would be an exaggeration to call Kirgizstan a democratic country, but it is true that it is the most liberal among all five former Soviet republics of the

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<sup>1</sup> ISIS, Islamic State and Daesh will be used as synonyms here

region. Since 1991, it has suffered various waves of ethnic tension, which, several times, culminated in violence, as for example the riots in 2010 in southern Kyrgyzstan. Some local researchers, such as Begijon Ahmedov, signaled that the State, anxious to extinguish a fire of ethnic rivalries and inter-clan contradictions, left Islamists to create a powerful network, which, until recently, did not experience serious pressure from the authorities. (Захид,Н. & Джедения, М., 2017) Eventually, Osh, the southern capital of the country, became a center of terrorist activity, where representatives of Daesh organized recruitment of Kyrgyz youth and their transfer to Syria and Iraq. Situated in the Fergana valley, one of the most conflicted regions of the world, near the border of Uzbekistan, Osh became the place to work for the destabilization of that country, which has always been the main purpose of Islamists in Central Asia. (Antiterrortoday, 2013)

Islam has been the predominant religion (91.6%) in Kyrgyz society since the 19th century, despite the fact that, according to several scholars, in their everyday lives, Kyrgyz people of that era were almost unaware of their confession. In recent years, Islam developed some more extreme positions related to the penetration of anti-secular ideas. In the quest to distant themselves from their Soviet past and communist ideology, the leaders of the new independent states of Central Asia opened the door for Islam, proclaiming it to be an inseparable part of identity of their peoples Through this open door came not only variants of this religion that were traditional for Kyrgyz society, but also several radical interpretations that, at least in the first years of independence, did not come to the attention of ruling elite. Until recently, Kyrgyzstan has been the only country in the region where authorities infrequently interfere in matters of religion. Meanwhile, the certification of 1,700 Islamic religious leaders, conducted in 2015, showed that about 60% of imams performing ‘Zhuma-Namaz’ “do not know how to read the Quran. Paradoxically, confidence in these imams increased dramatically among the population, where about 80% of Muslims cannot answer the question of which Islamic sect they belong to; more than 99% have never read the Quran and 25.6% live below the line of absolute poverty” (Захид,Н. & Джедения, М., 2017). The appeals of the Islamic State found fertile soil in this liberal, but poor country, where drug trafficking mercilessly corrupts institutions and people.

As a result, in late 2015 through 2017, about 500 Kyrgyz militants were supposed to have joined ISIS (Group, 2015); one hundred twenty-one or 144 of them, depending on the source, were women; 44 of the total returned voluntarily to their country (Захид,Н. & Джедения, М., 2017). In 2018, when ISIS was almost defeated militarily, it became clear that the real number of recruits was much higher, around one thousand. (Богданович, Вооружится ли Киргизия умеренным исламом в борьбе с исламом политическим?, 2018) Kirgiz citizens were part of 4,200 central Asian persons in the terrorist

organization, who, in their turn, were part of 8,000 Russian speakers in the so-called Caliphate.

Anna Matveeva states that “there are no theoretically sound and empirically grounded answers as to why individuals join extremist movements and commit acts of terrorism” (Matveeva, 2018). This paper is a modest contribution to explore such an explanation. It asks the opinion of the families as to the incentives that drove migrants to ISIS thousands of kilometers from their fatherland to fight for someone else's cause.

### *Methodology*

The field work was done by the author, in close cooperation with the regional office of the Antiterrorist Center of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The team employed a Russian speaking interpreter of Uzbek origin, who also spoke the official language of the country. Twenty-seven families<sup>1</sup> of people joining ISIS from four regions, Bishkek, Karabalta, Osh and Aravan, were interviewed; twenty-two in their homes and five on their places of business. More than one family member took part in the interviews, with, as expected, men being more active than women. What follows are part of the results of the survey, carried out through semi-structured in-depth interviews.

The questions were chosen with the idea of developing a reconstruction of the life stories of ISIS militants and to shed light on their individual decision-making process. In order to do so, additional groups of variables have been introduced: demographic (ethnic origin, age, sex, civil status, children, education, profession, parents ‘family’); economic (labor status, satisfaction with the incomes, housing); circumstances of recruitment (ways of recruitment, close relatives in ISIS, belonging to radical circles, internet contacts with radical personalities and organizations, parents’ approval, changes in the way of life), personal motivation (religiosity before radicalization, religious sophistication, ideology, protest, perspectives for self-realizations, economic reasons, quest for adventure, wish to create family).

### *Results*

Almost 90% of Kyrgyz fighters in ISIS were of Uzbek origin. Relatives offered different explanation of this fact: the Uzbek diaspora still feels discriminated against; Uzbeks are among the most educated and mobile people in Central Asia; and finally, the impact of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is stronger among ethnic Uzbeks than among ethnic Kyrgyz. All these

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<sup>1</sup> “Families” is used here in sense of extended families, which are traditional for Kyrgyzstan and which include parents of the husband, as well as families of his close male relatives

explanations are plausible During the field work the author found propaganda materials, prepared especially for Uzbek population in Kyrgyzstan, emphasizing just these arguments for joining the movement.

Most of persons who joined ISIS were males, aged 16-39, (most of them 22-28), married with 2 -3 children. Women fell into two age groups, the first one was composed of 15-16 years old and the second one – of women around their 30. Some of fighters, especially from southern Kyrgyzstan, had more than one wife; most of polygamous men, whose extended families were interviewed, went with wives and children. Our question, “Didn’t your daughter-in-law oppose that decision?” was answered in most cases with the following: “She is never permitted to participate in family decision-making” or “She never dares to contradict her husband’s decisions.”

All individuals had attended school; some had only completed nine years, others eleven years or secondary education.

The parents’ families of most migrants to ISIS belong to lower strata of the middle class, whose economic and social situation sharply worsened after 1991.

Most men were low-skilled, without any vocational training, and, unable to find any job in their country, immigrated to Russia, accepting less pay in the construction business. It seems that many were radicalized in Russia. Unfortunately, we do not know a lot about how that process of radicalization went.

Among the women, who left of their own free-will (not just following their husbands) there were three young girls, one medical student around aged 30 two sisters who were 16 and 15 years old and studying in a secondary school. One was of Uzbek and two of Kyrgyz origin. As a whole, the social status of their parents was higher than of the men who went.

Contrary to wide-spread opinion voiced in local media, Kyrgyz migrants to ISIS did not belong to the poorest sectors of society.<sup>2</sup> They all had some job, many worked in Russia. Only two had severe economic problems related to credit they were not able to repay. The families were unanimous that money was not the most important motive, despite the fact that the young people were not satisfied with their economic status. To be fair, in a country with average month salary of 154 euro (CEIC, 2018) the question could well be asked, “Who would not be discontented?”

On the other hand, housing and living conditions were more than acceptable. Twenty-two interviews were carried out in homes that were well heated and maintained. There were three exceptions of very poor and abandoned houses. These situations were due to the alcoholism of male family

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<sup>2</sup> This opinion is shared by several researchers, Efraim Benmelech and Esteban F. Klor among others (Benmelech, E.& Klor, E., 2018)

members who were responsible for the upkeep of the houses. It is true, however that, in most cases, militants' houses were situated in districts and villages with extremely reduced social infrastructure. It was a common sight to see men standing or squatting in front of their yards, without any occupation, without meaningful pursuit, without any chance for vocational training. In the words of one respondent, these men might spend their time discussing insignificant details of the life of the Prophet, for example "what the prophet ate on the various days of the week". In the literal sense, there is nothing to do in these so called "depressive regions" and life, as the brother of a male migrant said, "is boring and miserable not because of lack of money, but because here nothing ever happens".

The third group of variables has to do with circumstances of recruitment. The interviewees were not quite aware of how their relative was recruited. Almost all supposed that militants were radicalized in Russia, where, without any vocational training, they lived illegally in large Russian cities, competing for the most unpretentious and low paid work, sharing squalid rooms without running water with 15 other Central Asian men. In addition, they suffered the disparagement and social exclusion in a culturally different society. It could be supposed that the growing sense of injustice and anger made them vulnerable to the appeals of ISIS.

Most of Kyrgyz fighters did not have any close family member belonging to radical circles. However, families noticed certain changes in the way of life and appearance of would-be-militants. Men accepted the characteristic for radical Islamist. They grew beards and wore different trousers, stopped drinking, and started spending almost all their time reading the Quran. They also changed their relations, abandoning old friends and joining radical circles. Girls stopped working and leaving home, started wearing the burka and cut all relations with males outside of their family. They rejected the old friends and joined groups of already radicalized women. To the question "Didn't those changes in your daughters bother you?", a man said: "You know, when a daughter says to her Muslim father that she will no longer go to the disco, will not drink or smoke, and will not communicate with men outside of the family, he feels happy. How could I reproach my girl for her will to be a devoted believer?" Many other families also welcome such changes. However, the deepening of religious fervor at some level started to disturb them. A father from Aravan said, "I tried to explain to him that there was no need to spend all the time reading Quran; that he has to continue working in order to maintain his family and above all, to stop visiting that group of Wahhabis [the general term used in Central Asia to designate radicals] who taught him an Islam that has nothing to do with our traditional Islam. But he didn't pay attention to me; he insisted we are not real Muslims."

Most families were not quite aware why their sons and daughters embraced radical ideas. They are almost unanimous that such concepts are far from moderate and peaceful Kyrgyz Islam. A mother from Osh, a 46 year old nurse, said, “My father was an imam in Soviet times, but he never insisted that we strictly complete all rituals of our religion. We were required to follow moral principles of Islam, and I consider that in doing so, we were good Muslims.”

It seems that despite of being worried, the families were unable to help their relatives; they did not know how to fight radical influences and did not dare to contact state institutions for fear of making the situation worse. A father of Aravan said, “I realized something bad was happening with him, but I was not ready to contact police because I was afraid my son would be arrested. In our province there is no state institution that supports families of people impacted by destructive religious groups, no NGO that could help. And nothing has changed. People from the district call him “terrorist”, they avoid us and even old friends turn their heads when they meet us. So, the only available alternative for me is to leave all and to follow my son in Syria.”

None of the family members of the militants recognized that was familiar with the plans of their relatives to leave for ISIS; parents of no militant gave their permission for such a step. This is a serious deviation from the tradition and from the Islamic rule, obliging any man willing to take the path of jihad, to ask permission from his parents. In general, they considered that bad people, who took advantage of their innocence”, have misled their sons and daughters. However, the study of the profiles of some Kyrgyz fighters showed that other motivations drove these young people in their decision. I call these motivations quest for identity, quest for community and quest for being the protagonists in their own lives.

*Quest for identity, quest for community, quest to be the protagonists in their own lives: part of reliable explanation?*

According the respondents, none of militants was a devoted Muslim before contact with radical groups. Islamist groupings gave them strong sense of Muslim identity. As Uzbeks, they stopped feeling second class citizens. A cousin of a fighter said, “He believed that the Islamic state treats all people equally, disregarding their nationality and ethnicity. When he gave up his national passport, he believed that he became just another member of ummah, a group not be divided by ethnicity or nationality. Later he understood this was only propaganda because [according to his words] Arabs sent Russian speakers on the riskiest operations, where the probability of returning [alive] was minimal”.

The sense of community was one of the most attractive things for all foreign fighters, even the Kyrgyz’s. Almost all families pointed out the deep

satisfaction of their relatives in the fact that they shared a common cause and life among people sharing the same values, way of life and ideas about the future.

Probably the most important aspect of attractiveness of Islamic state is the fact that apparently it removes all intermediaries between a person and God and gives young people the chance to be the main protagonists in their own lives. One respondent reported that when he told his son that, according to Kyrgyz tradition, he has to take care about his old parents, and cannot abandon them by going to ISIS, the son answered that someday his parents will realize that such was the will of Allah. Another respondent got the same answer when he reminded his would-be-fighter brother that they had to care about the family of their younger cousin who was diabetic. In patriarchal Kyrgyz society, relation between person and God is mediated by authority of clerics, men, elders, tradition: "In our society, a young girl said – you cannot do anything without approval of the family. I, for example, do not want to have a crowded wedding, I prefer to spend this money for studying at the university. But I will not be allowed to do so because it will be a disgrace to my parents, who will be accused by the community that they are not able to arrange a decent wedding to their daughter."

Removing those authorities which young people should obey, fearing stigma if they did disobey, gives them strong sense of liberation. I would even say that joining ISIS and hoping they can contribute to a new just State, the Caliphate, this younger generation of Muslims expressed their protest against the patriarchal societies into which they were born. One family reported the story of their son who in Kyrgyzstan was an absolute loser. The boy stuttered and because of that was not accepted as an apprentice cameraman. The same defect prevented him from marrying his girlfriend since the parents did not accept him, and from finding a job. With such a stigma, he left for ISIS, where he was given the chance to practice his passion – the camera. The result was a series of 30 videos, 30 minutes each, proclaiming the glory of terrorism. His mother supposes he will never return home. "There he got self-realization as a professional and as a person".

Indeed, other motives also were important such as a sense for injustice to ummah (Islam does not recognize borders and nations. Thus any offense, even against geographically distant groups of Muslims, as for example, Palestine and Syria, are experienced as offenses against any member of the ummah), quest for heroic adventures, the will to create a family (for girls), the wish to travel and to see new people and places.

Concerning the heroic adventures, families were not aware if their relatives wanted to become shadids (martyrs), but the interview with three recruiters in Osh put in pre-trial detention facility did confirm this motivation. The recruiters were asked three additional questions in order to identify their

religious sophistication and religiosity. The first one was: “Do you know that you can become a shahid only under declared war between yours and another country? None of them were aware of that. The second question: “Do you know that you can become shahid only with the permission of your parents?” This also got a negative answer. The third question was: “Why did you recruit people only for ISIS, if there are so many places where your Muslim brothers are suffering, as for example Palestine?” They answered: “We do not know of such places.” The conclusion to be drawn is that they (if they are sincere) felt a deep wish for heroic deeds, but were not very sophisticated in the religion. Thus, they would be easily manipulated by the extremists, who are able to convince them that ‘their’ version of Islam is the true one.

Are there some men guided by economic motives? The answer seems to be positive. During the field work, I became aware of some materials in Uzbek, saying that any man, who is an expert in engineering, medicine, telecommunications, PR or Islamic law and who joins ISIS with his family, will be paid \$27,000 per month.

It would be wrong to accept that there is a common motive that guides all migrants to ISIS; rather, we should speak about a set of motives that differs across nations and ethnic groups.

#### *What about women?*

Participation of Kyrgyz women in ISIS is the tip of the iceberg, the result not only of extremist propaganda, but also of several processes that have recently taken place in the rigid system of gender roles, as well as of gender inequality which has little changed in the past almost 30 years of independence.

According to official data of the State Committee of National Security, 7.4% out of all women who joined ISIS, actively disseminated radical ideas together with men, and create groups of proselytes, ready to defend the Caliphate with all means available to them. (Богданович, Обреченные на экстремизм, или Куда приводят киргизстанок порочные традиции, 2018). The rest could be divided into three groups: wives following their husbands; spinsters, who, reaching their 30s, have lost hope of marrying in their own country, and finally, women practicing by their own will or by circumstances the so-called sex-jihad.

Wives following their husbands are probably the most significant reason for Kyrgyz women to join ISIS. As their mothers-in-law law said, they never had the right to participate in family decision-making mainly because they were victims, being married as minors, being abducted with the aim of being induced to marry, being part of a polygamous marriage, or a religious marriage with no legal consequences. All these illegal practices are possible due to poor legislation which is not based on gender equality. For example. on May 26, 2016, Kyrgyz members of parliament rejected a bill that would have



criminalized the conduct of the religious rite of marriage involving minors. According to opinions of some analysts, the current state of affairs is no more than a legalization of pedophilia. The expert of international finances Danyar Aytman wrote in his blog that 15% of all Kyrgyz women marry before reaching 18, "Small, miserable, obedient girls, not matured either physically or morally. They become slaves - sexual as well. They are beaten, raped and exploited as the last beast. They lose their childhood, health, future. They have no rights. ... They can only accept their fate, because their slavery was consecrated in the name of Allah. After all, the stench of our national pedophilia is that we have it with a religious flavor." (АЙТМАН, 2016). Unfortunately, these women, who considered that they were doing their duty when following their husbands, now have to pay a terrible price for their loyalty. According to open sources, at the end of the last year at least three Kyrgyz women were in jail, together with 10 children, expecting to be sentenced for joining ISIS. In fact, one has been known to have already been sentenced to death. As a rule, trials are carried out in the Arabic language, there are not interpreters or even lawyers for the accused. According to what has been published by the international press, since the mid-February of 2018, 16 wives of Turkish militants of ISIS have been sentenced to death (Kaktusmedia, 2018). These women are accused of terrorism and of illegally crossing the state border of Iraq. They were taken to the Middle East by their husbands, who joined the Islamic State terrorist group, and, after their death, the widows were left to their fate. (КЫРГЫЗСТАНКУ, ПРИГОВОРЕННУЮ К СМЕРТНОЙ КАЗНИ В ИРАКЕ, ПРОСЯТ СПАСТИ, 2018). It is possible that more Kyrgyz women will suffer the same destiny. There is no reliable information because when they marry ISIS militants, they destroy their documents granted by secular authorities and change their names. It is known that Iraqi authorities are holding around 1,400 foreign wives and children of suspected Islamic State fighters in a prison south of Mosul (Jalabi, 2017) and several of them are Russian speakers.

The next group of women, the spinsters, are females nearing their 30s. Among them there are great number of medical students. At the beginning it was accepted that they joined ISIS because of their humanitarian profession, in order to take part in the public health system of Islamic State. It is well known that it was one of points of pride for ISIS. However, this hypothesis was not confirmed in conversation with families, where it became clear that those 30 year old women had lost hope of having a family in their local communities because of their age. The stigma pushed them to take such an extreme step.

The romantic motive to find a husband drove many Kyrgyz females. The story of two sisters told by their father, whom I met in his native town, around a year and half after the departure of his wife, who had left to join her daughters to take care of the grandchildren, is a good example.

Chinara y Amina (the names are fictitious) lived in Kara Balta province in a family belonging to the middle class. Both the mother and the father had jobs that were relatively well paid for the standards of Kyrgyzstan. The sisters were 16 and 14 years. As is the case with most females in Kyrgyzstan, they went to school. The girls, just as the parents, were believers, but not devoted Muslims. They went Friday namaz (Mohammedan prayer) and after that met friend and relatives in so called namaz-hana (places, when people can order dinner or bring from food home). Being born during the Soviet time, when religious practices were not encouraged, the parents never strictly followed the rituals of their religion. The mother never covered her head and body and educated her daughters in same secular habits and ways of dress.

The first changes were observed in the older daughter. When she went to the high school, she started working in the hair-dressing salon of her aunt, earning around 1000 soms per diem, quite a good salary. However, at some moment she rejected the work and started spending a lot of time chatting on Skype. At the same time, she stopped communicating with her class mates, going to discotheque and doing those things that young people in her provincial small town do for leisure. She decided to wear a burka, covering her face and body. This was alarming to her father. At the beginning he wanted to convince her to return to the hair-dressing salon and to her contacts with young people from the school. But the girl was reticent to do that. She spent all her spare time with a group of women who joined together to learn about the Quran – at least this was what she told her parents. They did not know how to cope with the situation. There was no organization or government institution supporting families whose members were in danger of violent radicalization. At the same time, due the low trust in the police, which is considered to be one of the most corrupted institution in Kyrgyzstan, the father did not contact them. Eventually, after several conversations with his older daughter, he understood that Chinara is in contact with a neighbor of theirs, a 19 years old boy, former sportsman, who was already fighting for ISIS. While being afraid that she would follow him, the father looked for someone to marry her, but the girl rejected all the candidates. The father gave up. He did not want to force his beloved daughter against her will. One Saturday evening, when they returned from a visit to the wife's sister, they did not find Chinara at home. At that point they did go to the police, and an investigation was started. As a result, it became clear that the girl had left the country through the airport at Bishkek, with destination to Turkey. After some months, she got in contact with her younger sister, who was under the strict custody of their parents since they were afraid she would follow Chinara. Amina told her parents that her sister was pregnant and father got furious because the husband did not ask his permission for the marriage, as local tradition required. He invited him to Kyrgyzstan in order to speak "as a man with a man". The husband promised, but never came back to Krygyzstan.

Meanwhile, Amina, with the help of her sister, entered into sentimental relationship with another Kyrgyz young man fighting for ISIS. She told her extended family several times that she wanted to go to Syria and marry him, but no one of her relatives agreed. The father, wanting to be sure she would not follow her sister, hid her passport. However, one day the girl disappeared and in a few months they got the news that she was in Rakka, with her sister's family and her husband, and was pregnant.

The parents wanted to go to Syria in order to return their girls, but were not allowed to cross the border. Some weeks after the returning home of the father, the mother, also pregnant, decided to go to Syria in order to help her girls with the children, as Kyrgyz tradition requires. According to the father, she never returned. The last thing he knew about them was that they were together and that they invited him to join them in Daesh. But the father rejected this idea. "How can I know who is writing by skype – my family or other persons. Even if they are on the other side, how can be I sure they are doing all that by their free will?" Moreover, he did not want to leave his 7 years old son, who lived with him, alone with no mother or father.

A young mother, who was interviewed during the field work, was not successful in leaving the county as her parents had her was arrested at the airport. She told me her motives for joining the Caliphate. She hoped that this would be the ideal place to raise her two children, under the rule of sharia, far from drugs, alcohol and extra matrimonial sex.

All that has a lot to do with the quest for identity, women joining ISIS believed they would be able to reach their real Islamic female identity in the Islamic state among people voluntarily sharing the same legal and moral norms (sharia); being wives and mothers, keepers of the home and love, sources of life and support for their beloved people.

Indeed, some women were also driven by economic motives. However, they were moved not by poverty itself, but by the vulnerability the poverty creates. According to the head of the religious organization "Mutakalim" Zhamal Fronbekkyzy, "homeless, unemployed women who do not know how to feed their children are ready to go anywhere for a small amount of money. Recruiters also understand that women sitting without light, heat and food are ready for a lot. This is what they use, and they are betting on it." As a result of special operations of law enforcement agencies of Kyrgyzstan held in 2016, out of 152 cases of recruitment of citizens taken into custody, 91% were women who were previously indifferent to religion. (Богданович, Обреченные на экстремизм, или Куда приводят киргизстанок порочные традиции, 2018)

Can it be considered that the act of joining ISIS is some expression of Islamic feminism? I will not take part in this long discussion which has been an academic debate for the past 40 years. I will only point out that during the field

work no proof for any feminist attitude or behavior was found; the very idea of feminism sounded to families strange and incomprehensible.

### *Conclusions*

On the basis of the above mentioned, the following conclusions could be drawn:

1. Kyrgyz militants are mainly men, aged 22-28.
2. Most women migrated to ISIS following their husbands, however there are also females that did “hijrah” (sacred emigration) by their own decision
3. Migrants to ISIS are predominantly of Uzbek background.
4. They originate from families that belong to lower strata of middle class, and come from so called depressive zones
5. Kyrgyz militants as a whole do not belong to the less educated and unemployed sectors
6. Economic motives matter, but poverty is not the main drive; it is rather lack of social services and opportunities for personal development
7. Most militants were radicalized and recruited in Russia; however significant number were radicalized in their own country by Islamist groups acting there.
8. Most families were unaware of the radicalization and recruitment process and at the beginning did not realize the threat that such processes posed.
9. No family indicated that they were familiar with the plans of ISIS migrants; no parents reported giving permission of their sons or daughters to take part in jihad
10. Even realizing the threat of radicalization, families were not able to prevent it because of lack of knowledge and skills and lack of support by State or local authorities.
11. There is no universal motive that drives Kyrgyz militants to ISIS
12. Personal motivation of young Muslims of Kyrgyzstan to join Islamic state has to do with quest for identity, quest for community and quest for being main protagonists of their own lives.
13. The same motives are valid for women; however, some additional ones can be observed in them: unconditional execution of the debt of a Muslim female to follow her husband; wish to have home and family; sentimental relations with men who were already fighting for ISIS.
14. All this should be treated not in the light of simplistic concepts, based on female physiology and character, but as expression of the quest for identity, as understood by those women.

*What to do: some recommendations*

Fifteen years ago Fiona Hill warned the USA Congress that “an objective and thoughtful analysis of the roots of religious extremism, a long-term commitment to assistance, and careful assessment, coordination, and contingency planning are the only solutions to dealing with the challenges of Central Asia and to achieving success in the war on terrorism in the region.” (Hill, 2003). While this view is most commendable, some additional thoughts can be given. Probably the most important is to carefully study the roots of different religious extremist ideas, not bringing them under a common denominator as it is often done. The Islamist organizations active in Kyrgyzstan have different ways of acting, radicalizing and recruiting people and they should be taken in consideration. On another hand, the religious and secular authorities should be aware of the new generation of Muslims in the country; a generation that wants to be Muslims in “their way”. They will continue protesting against the low standard of living, corruption, and bad governance, but above all will request their right to have a strong positive identity and to be main protagonist in their lives and in the life of their country. The same is true for women, with the remark that an effective prevention of their participation in terrorist organizations should rely on a strong legislative basis, founded on the principles of gender equality; on policies of protection of their human rights at all levels; on the prohibition of some traditions that are not compatible with the postulates of the modern world as for example abduction of brides; marriages with girls under 18.

*Discussion*

This study has several limitations. First of all, the sample is too small. Second, the author worked in a close cooperation with the antiterrorist center, what could bother respondents and make them hide part of the truth, being afraid for their relatives. Moreover, the number of families of women joining ISIS by their own will (not just following their husbands) is incomparably smaller than the number of militants' families. It also should be said that male respondents were much more active than female respondents. This probably means that the opinions of women were not fairly expressed. And finally, lack of direct communication (there were family members who do not speak Russian) and gender imbalance (more men than women were interviewed) could also worsen the quality of the research. However, taking into considerations that we are at the beginning of the investigation of root causes of terrorism in Central Asia, this paper could be seen as a modest contribution to the empirical basis, which all of us need in order to go further.

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