

NOT IN OUR NAME

About The Project

Project of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty

OVERVIEW

Not In Our Name is a research and documentary project developed by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) to help communities in Central Asia understand and prevent the spread of violence and extremism. It is the first regional counter-extremism project ever produced for Central Asia.

The challenge Central Asian communities face from extremist groups is real. According to recent estimates, countries of the former Soviet Union were the largest single source of foreign fighters in the Syria/Iraq conflict, providing more recruits than neighboring states in the Middle East. Although they share no cultural or language ties to Syria or Iraq, it is estimated that more than 4,200 Central Asians joined the conflict, many with their families. Communities across the region will feel the effects for decades as individuals exposed to the horrors of war and extremist ideology return to their homes, and families struggle to understand the losses they have suffered, while confronting the recruitment efforts of new and resilient extremist groups.

RESEARCH FOUNDATION AND METHODOLOGY

During a three-month period starting in November, 2017, an RFE/RL project team conducted research and interviews with families in 16 locations in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan that lost members in Syria and Iraq. These video portraits and testimonials were then presented to discussion groups of young people from the region to share their experiences and perspectives. The project's production team included researchers and journalists with significant experience in the field of violent extremism in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and the broader region. The discussions were conducted and filmed in all five regional languages and Russian.

A key finding during the project's research phase was that successful mobilization by groups like ISIS for recruitment to Syria was not broadly distributed, but clustered in specific geographic areas. Our research team was able to identify "hot zones" in each country where recruitment efforts were concentrated. For example, the relatively isolated Aravan district in Kyrgyzstan accounts for only 2% of the country's total population, but up to a third of all recruits to the Syrian conflict.

Accordingly, in each country, the project team identified a "hot zone," or a primary recruiting zone, that it selected as the site for fieldwork, family interviews and a first, moderated discussion session. This was followed by a second discussion session in a regional capital or nearby larger city that was less directly affected by recruitment efforts. A third session brought participants from both locations together to share their very different experiences.

One month after these meetings, selected participants from every discussion group were brought to Bishkek for a final session to explore the questions from a regional perspective – why Central Asia? What should be done to counter recruiting? What role do governments, society and families play? What has worked and what doesn't?

Kazakh, Tajik, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek participants from all ten sessions agreed there are no simple answers. But many said the project launched a process of discussion and reflection that can help communities take a stand to declare, Not In Our Name.

KEY FINDINGS

Families and participants, especially in the "hot zones," consistently affirmed the need for more reporting and information about these issues on the community level, in some cases citing societal taboos that have inhibited their ability to openly discuss factors they believe contribute to extremist recruitment.

Not In Our Name participants fear the problems and divisions that led to successful extremist recruiting in their home towns have not been solved and have not disappeared. Participants and interviewees identified such problems as unemployment, injustice, discrimination, corruption, inequality of opportunity, and gaps in both secular and religious education. One Tajik participant, who was a labor migrant in Russia, said that in his country, "Over 40% of the population is unemployed. Most who left for Syria were labor migrants in a foreign country, things were bad for them, their families were in need."

Both violent groups like ISIS and fundamentalist groups that have embraced violence elsewhere have found continued support in some communities. Participants fear this could lead to increased divisions and eruptions of violence at home.

Most former fighters from each community were killed in the conflict, but many of their families and children remain trapped in Iraq and Syria. Many families in interviews and focus group participants agreed that society and the state should make efforts to return, reeducate and reintegrate non-combatants and children.

Traditional spousal roles and relationships limit choices for women, in particular. In the words of one participant, "*In Central Asia, when a husband calls his wife and says, 'come to [Syria],' she is not allowed to argue, to think it through for herself — she can't say no.*"

Some participants approved of state measures that seek to regulate religious expression (for example, bans on certain religious groups, prayer rooms and headscarves), and some approved of individual, public expressions of faith (for example, beards or hijab), but many argued that these were ultimately counterproductive.