STATE RESPONSES TO TERRORISM-TRAFFICKING NEXUS IN KYRGYZSTAN: SHORT TERM RISKS, LONG TERM PROSPECTS

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The links between terrorism and transnational organized crime pose an emerging challenge to international peace and security. Academics and policymakers alike recognize the multiple and complex ways in which terrorism and organized crime may intersect. There has been, however, inadequate attention to the opportunities and challenges in addressing the crime-terrorism nexus. As a step in this direction, this memo offers a conceptual framework for thinking systematically about national responses to terrorism-crime connections and applies that framework to Kyrgyzstan. Marked by intra-elite divisions, state paralysis, and twice overwhelmed by elite-led protests (2005 and 2010), Kyrgyzstan has emerged as an intersection of organized criminal organizations, drug trafficking, and limited terrorist activity.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: ASSESSING STATE RESPONSES TO THE TERRORISM-TRAFFICKING NEXUS

State capacity to respond to the terrorism-trafficking nexus can be analyzed across two dimensions – the capability and the willingness to address the terrorism/trafficking nexus. State capability answers the question: “Does the state have the institutional, human, financial, and other resources to address the nexus?” State willingness asks whether the government is sufficiently motivated to put formal policies and strategies into action as well as apply technical/financial/human resources effectively. Depending on the answers to these questions, we infer four types of state capacity (summarized in Table 1). States with high levels on both dimensions possess hegemonic state capacity (when state offices are able to effectively translate their high institutional, technical, financial, and human capabilities into preventing, monitoring, and dismantling the nexus). States with high capabilities but low levels of willingness to apply those capabilities possess captured state capacity (when state offices are used to protect and serve interests and activities within the trafficking/terrorism nexus that severely limits the effective use of national capabilities). States with low capabilities but high levels of willingness to apply their capabilities possess degraded state capacity (when state offices attempt but only
partially succeed in preventing, monitoring, and dismantling the terrorism/trafficking nexus). States with low levels on both dimensions possess failed state capacity (when state offices cease to exercise any influence over the interests and activities within the trafficking/terrorism nexus, which in turn challenges the authority of the state itself).

**Table 1. Outcomes of State Capacities**

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<tr>
<th>High Willingness to Address Nexus</th>
<th>Low Willingness to Address Nexus</th>
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<tr>
<td>High Capability to Address Nexus</td>
<td>Hegemonic State Capacity</td>
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<td>Low Capability to Address Nexus</td>
<td>Degraded State Capacity</td>
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<td>Captured State Capacity</td>
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<td>Failed State Capacity</td>
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**ASSESSING THE STATE RESPONSE IN KYRGYZSTAN**

**Internal Divisions Threaten the State’s Capacity to Govern.** Having initiated political liberalization in the early 1990s, Kyrgyzstan’s political elite in parliament and in the presidential administration remain fraught with regional, local, and clan divisions. These internal divisions, coupled with a weak and underfunded infrastructure, have gradually eroded the state’s capacity, which has oscillated between degraded, failed, and captured. A fundamental challenge to Kyrgyzstan is the extensive drug trade and the organized criminal activity centered on it. As illustrated in Figure 1, most drug trafficking in Kyrgyzstan is concentrated in Batken, Osh, and Jalalabad Provinces, all of which are parts of the Ferghana Valley (spreading across parts of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan). The various transit routes for opiates from Afghanistan run through the northern Sughd Province of Tajikistan and converge in Osh city, which provides the prime location for a nexus of organized crime and religious extremist groups.
Whereas Tajikistan has witnessed the consolidation and gradual incorporation of drug trafficking and organized crime within its state apparatus after its civil war (1992-1997), Kyrgyzstan has experienced the gradual erosion of its state capacities to respond to the trafficking/terrorism nexus in both the northern and southern parts of the country. Interviews indicate that the largest decline in capacity occurred between 2005 and 2010 during Kurmanbek Bakiev’s presidency, and efforts to counter this downward trend have remained marginal. Under Bakiev, there were reportedly 31 different criminal groups (relatively small, between 5-15 members) in the country, many of which operated under the patronage and protection of their regional and local elites. During and immediately after periods of upheaval in 2005 and 2010, moreover, these criminal groups were able to operate without seeking political protection from weakened law enforcement authorities. It was the post-2010 government’s concern with the political clout of these groups – reaching into parliament and the presidency – that spurred it to crack down on them. Overall, Kyrgyzstan compared to Tajikistan appears less permeated by corruption and more open to influence from free media and civil society watchdogs, but it is weaker in its strategic and operational capacity.
Coordination and Capacity among Security Agencies. Kyrgyzstan has a long history of anti-drug trafficking policing, but that has not translated into effectiveness in dealing with the drug trade (which is the greatest challenge confronting the state at present). Since the 1980s, Kyrgyzstan has sought to establish interagency relationships to address the multifaceted nature of trafficking, crime, and instability, but law enforcement officials confronted ongoing competition (over credit and rents) rather than interest in collaboration. As one political analyst noted, there are periods of time when agencies have a standing arrangement on how those payments are distributed. But when there is an external reshuffling of elites (i.e., after 2005 or 2010) or when one agency seeks to gain more of a share of the rents, indications of open competition can be seen in the charges of corruption or misuse of office that are brought by one or two agencies against another. While Tajikistan is deemed to be closer to a “narco-state,” in which large portions of the state apparatus are involved in the drug trade, several interviewees emphasized that there are only “key persons” within Kyrgyzstan’s state – mostly within its law enforcement and security agencies – that provide protection. Moreover, security agencies lack the necessary funds for salaries, equipment, and infrastructure.

The Drug Control Agency in Kyrgyzstan, in contrast to its counterpart in Tajikistan, has long had internal problems and external pressures that undermined its institutional capacity. Created in 2003, but opened and closed several times, its seizures were markedly smaller than the National Security Service and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), and it eventually fell victim to a turf war with the latter. Border control and customs control agencies remain marginally involved in counter-narcotics efforts. Border control officers were reportedly instructed not to make drug trafficking a priority (and to focus on espionage instead), while customs agents claimed their primary role was to enforce tariffs on cross-border transited goods.

Interviewees also noted that there is very limited strategic analysis (collection and use of statistics), especially on drug trade, and little interest by higher-ups to "modernize" in this regard. This varies from Tajikistan where there is much greater institutional capacity in strategic analysis (though not necessarily on operations). Compared to Tajikistan’s 50-person strategic analysis unit, Kyrgyzstan has only 10 persons (of whom only 2 individuals actually collect and analyze statistical data). Moreover, there remains a quota system in place in terms of arrests, seizures, and operations – as well as reported crimes in a province. As a result, there is a standard practice of having each month’s (or year’s) quota barely met, which stymies any effort to properly analyze patterns of crime and security threats.

Kyrgyzstan also has a very limited capacity in regards to strategic analysis of human trafficking. According to international organization (IO) officials, there were only six officials in Kyrgyzstan devoted to human trafficking until 2016, when 300 MIA officers were assigned to focus on the problem, and there is no line item for human trafficking in the state budget. This lack of
institutional capacity has been in part due to the government’s dependence on the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) sector to address human trafficking in Kyrgyzstan.²

Despite these challenges, the MIA has collaborated with civil society groups in instituting democratic police reform to reduce corruption and predation while making the police more responsive to society. This suggests a willingness to engage in reform, but these efforts have been stymied by weakened institutional capacities within security agencies and, as discussed below, do not extend to ethnic minorities in southern Kyrgyzstan. As interviews with specialists and officials from IOs noted, IOs have promoted joint or inter-agency roundtables and trainings, and security offices do participate in these efforts (and point to the need for these linkages). But these inter-office trainings are solely sectoral in nature – focusing on how drug trafficking should be addressed or how to incorporate protections of human rights in prisons. Moreover, each security ministry conducts its own training and these are generally not coordinated. Likewise, there is little information sharing across agencies and each one produces its own reports. There is no effective top-down mechanism to coordinate them. One attempt at interagency cooperation that has been formed is the Defense Council, which advises the President. As such it touches on every aspect of the trafficking/terrorism nexus and there are even working groups established for each area or field in which there might be relevant security threats. According to several political analysts, however, this is mainly a venue for actors to meet – it does not gather or analyze information, and it cannot implement policies (which would need to be approved by Parliament before being translated into law).

**Recent Subnational Trends.** Individual regions have recently come to exemplify degraded state capacity (as summarized in Table 2). There were periods of time after the 2005 and 2010 uprisings when they manifested failed state capacity – i.e., when law enforcement agencies lost control over criminal groups and drug trafficking networks – but these appear to have been very brief. Moreover, these uprisings did not bring about a reorganization of security institutions, which remained intact while ministers or deputy ministers were replaced depending on their political ties. Since 2010, many interviewees noted, the regime has attempted to reassert its capabilities in addressing the nexus, but this effort remains plagued by an underdeveloped institutional capacity to address intersections of drug trafficking, crime, and various forms of social unrest.

Initial efforts to reform policing and security services’ decision-making and response times were not successfully carried out. In the wake of the 2010 violence, an agency called the Agency for Local Government and Ethnic Diversity was established to serve as an early warning system. While this agency has begun to work well with civil society and local community leaders, most security agencies are not involved in conflict resolution but focus on the investigation and prosecution of crimes. After it became evident that a coordinating mechanism would be needed should another mass violence episode or other crisis arise, several European governments
supported establishing a “situation room” that would bring together different agencies during a crisis. The donors pulled out, however, after it became clear the government was not sufficiently committed.

There is also a strong ethnic component to security dynamics (especially in the south after the 2010 violence), in which security agencies reportedly discriminate against ethnic Uzbeks (who are citizens of Kyrgyzstan) by targeting them for arrest, searches, as well as entering their homes without justification. It is claimed that these policing strategies are carried out in order to preserve security, but they are often a means by which security offices extort payments of bribes. Since these searches and abuses tend to target Uzbeks, several NGO experts in these regions have documented the rise of considerable anger and distrust between the latter and these provinces’ security and law enforcement offices. Security analysts also noted that this situation is reinforced by the makeup of these offices, which are largely held by Kyrgyz. Although they are roughly 45 percent of the city’s population, few Uzbeks staff its security agencies, police, or political offices.

This ethnic component in the southern regions has indirectly impacted the patterns of religious extremism. Since the 2010 violence, extremist groups have been “self-isolating,” or going underground, in order to avoid the repressive tactics of state security agencies that are targeting them due to their Uzbek ethnicity. The state and Uzbek minority are increasingly pulled into a cycle of perceived extremism, repression, marginalization, and potential extremism. Currently very few religious activists have been drawn to more extremist interpretations of Islam, and even fewer of those have taken up violence. These abuses coupled with ethnic tensions, however, foster a number of “pull and push factors” that could lead to violence given the volatile situation in the Osh and Jalalabad Provinces. Finally, electoral rules and party structures within Kyrgyzstan’s post-2010 parliamentary system tend to reward rather than penalize those political elites who reinforce nationalistic sentiment, marginalize minorities, and overlook issues in the south.

Table 2. Periodization and Subnational Cases of State Capacities

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<td><strong>Talas &amp; Chui Regions</strong></td>
<td>Degraded</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Osh &amp; Jalalabad Regions</strong></td>
<td>Degraded</td>
<td>Captured</td>
<td>Captured*</td>
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*During this period, Osh and Jalalabad Regions experienced short periods of failed state capacity.
THE CONSEQUENCES OF DEGRADED STATE CAPACITY: SHORT TERM RISK, LONG TERM SUCCESS

As Kyrgyzstan suggests, some countries with degraded state capacity can make inroads into addressing the nexus over the long term. However, degraded state capacity generates specific risk factors – ethnic tensions, arms/weapon diffusion, and targeted abuses – present short-term vulnerabilities to the terrorism/trafficking nexus. 4

Kyrgyzstan possesses potential for improving its long-term capacity to address the nexus for several reasons. First, enhanced security sector capabilities may undermine governance (by creating / reinforcing dependence on “praetorian guards,” by increasing rent-seeking behavior, and by fostering lack of accountability), but there is little evidence of this trend in Kyrgyzstan’s fledgling democracy. This leaves its security apparatus poised to enact tighter security measures with less risk of extensive corruption or abuses of authority. Additionally, moral hazard problems that may arise (in which security actors forgo actions against particular threats in order to encourage continued investment in their agencies) have had little visible effect at present. While security agencies continue to use a quota system of arrests, drug seizures, and tracking criminal activity, good governance and accountability to civilian authorities are likely to minimize moral hazard effects that may be encouraged by external security sector assistance.

Several short-term risks, however, exist. First, enhanced security has inadvertently exacerbated regional and ethnic tensions by promoting one group (Kyrgyz) at the expense of another (Uzbek) and by generating rumors, misconceptions, and conspiracies that feed those tensions. As Kyrgyzstan demonstrates, ethnic tensions, weak state apparatuses, and the abuses of authority can interact to cause unexpected diffusions of arms, persons, and expertise to non-state actors (through corruption, illicit sales of arms, and defections) and inadvertently lead targeted populations – religious activists and ethnic minorities – to become further marginalized. This has exacerbated elements of the terrorism/trafficking nexus, introducing new and heightening existing obstacles to security in the short run.

This assessment suggests that external security sector assistance from states and IOs alike should: 1) incrementally increase technical and institutional support for developing Kyrgyzstan’s security infrastructure; 2) make that support contingent upon measures that reduce ethnic tensions in its southern regions (i.e., incorporate groups into local security and government offices proportional to their size in the population, end abuses targeting minorities, and focus on drug trafficking hubs); and 3) remain vigilant of emerging moral hazard problems.

1 This memo is part of the Minerva Research Initiative funded program, “Trafficking/Terrorism Nexus in Eurasia,” and is based on a series of semi-structured expert interviews conducted in Central Asia in 2016.
2 After 2005, international agencies decided to avoid working with the state and set up a network of 30 NGOs to address human trafficking.
4 These are adapted from Stephen Watts, Identifying and Mitigating Risks in Security Sector Assistance for Africa’s Fragile States (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 2015).