

**Thesis title: Understanding ideologies of “radical” Islamic movements in contemporary Kyrgyzstan**

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## ABSTARCT

This thesis examines violence potential of such Islamic movements like Tablighi Jamaat, Salafi and Hizb ut-Tahrir based on the study of the connection between religion and violence in their ideologies. In order to understand this connection, the study focuses on 17 qualitative interviews with the members of the above-mentioned movements as well as with the experts representing different areas. The thesis presents a background of the religious situation in the country, by drawing attention to the historical process of Islamization in Kyrgyzstan and peculiarities of the religious situation existing today. General characteristics of the movements under study are discussed as well. The conceptual framework used several key concepts like jihad, peace and peacebuilding in Islam, fundamentalism and arguments developed within the field of Critical Terrorism Studies.

The findings that emerge from the study indicate that generally members of the chosen Islamic movements, despite differences in their memberships, share an opinion that violence is not normal to Islam and that their ideologies mainly support a peaceful resolution of conflicts. Analysis of the experts' data reflects a division among them over the question of violence potential of the mentioned movements. For some experts popular narrative about the radicalization of Muslims is an exaggeration, for other experts, the conflicting nature is inherent to these movements. However, findings indicate that experts concurred that the risk of religious violence in Kyrgyzstan cannot be excluded, due to the number of external and internal factors both of religious and of non-religious in nature.

The study brings evidence to the on-going debates about a threat of radicalization of Muslims that at least in the ideologies of the movements there are strict regulations concerning the use of violence, which is usually committed in the case of self-defense. Yet in a secular understanding, a number of religious requirements followed by these movements, such as, claims that Islam is the only true way for the humanity, strict observance of religious practices can be considered as "radical" or "fundamentalist" but they generally exclude a component of violence, at least unjustified one.

**Key words:** Islamization, radicalization, fundamentalism, jihad, Kyrgyzstan, Tablighi Jamaat, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Salafi movement, Islamic movements, peace, violence.



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# Chapter 1. Introduction

Since Kyrgyzstan obtained independence<sup>1</sup> a quarter century ago, it has embarked on a path of the large-scale democratic transformations and liberalizations in all spheres of public and political life. However, there is a huge gap between rhetoric and reality; a number of political, social and economic challenges made Kyrgyzstan, once prominent on the international arena as an “island of democracy” highly unstable on its way of democracy-building (Engvall, 2011). Two state revolutions, two bloody ethnic conflicts imprinted in the post-Soviet history, though did not turn country away from the allegiance to democracy, however, contributed to the growing criticism of the state and demonstrated the vulnerability of the country in the face of serious challenges (Engvall, 2011).

On the background of these structural problems, the spiritual life of people seems to be on the stage of revival (Galdini, 2015; McGlinchey, 2009). Largely excluded from the communistic ideology of the Soviet Union as a relic of the past hampering progress, religion came back again in all its diversity of virtues and new challenges, as if there were no 70 years of atheism. New liberal religious policy, distinguished by minimum state interference into religious life and freedom of practices facilitated the revival of not only traditional religions like Islam or Christianity but also the arrival of new previously unknown, non-traditional religious groups and movements, predominantly of Islamic kind (Pelkmans, 2014).

In recent years, usual threats emanating from internal socio-economic and political problems as well as the external threat of terrorism from geographically close Afghanistan have been replaced with the new agenda of dangers of religious radicalization of Muslims in the country. Cases of people from Kyrgyzstan joining the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (hereinafter ISIS), are discussed from family to state level and external manifestation of this religion like growing number of mosques, women in hijabs, heavily bearded men in unusual Islamic clothing only heat up the discussions. There is a strong opinion that Islamization means radicalization (Heathershaw & Montgomery, 2014) since the kinds of “new” Islam brought in by members of various Islamic movements pose a threat to both security and traditional versions<sup>2</sup> of Islam. This thesis will therefore, consider “radical” Islamic movements in Kyrgyzstan, namely, Tablighi Jamaat (hereinafter TJ)<sup>3</sup>, Salafi<sup>4</sup> and Hizb ut-Tahrir (hereinafter HuT)<sup>5</sup> within the context of existing discourse about religious radicalization of Muslims in the

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<sup>1</sup> Kyrgyzstan was a part of the Soviet Union from 1924-1991

<sup>2</sup> The next chapter will discuss traditional versions of Islam

<sup>3</sup> Tablighi Jamaat from Urdu - society for spreading faith.

<sup>4</sup> The word “Salafi” refers to the first three generations of Muslims (starting with the companions of the Prophet Muhammad), also named as pious predecessors. (<http://www.theweek.co.uk/world-news/6073/what-is-salafism-and-should-we-be-worried-by-it>)

<sup>5</sup> Hizb ut-Tahrir from Arabic – Party of liberation. Often referred as a movement in both academia and media.



country. These movements<sup>6</sup> have many followers, often referred in the media and claimed to be the most “dangerous” by the secular part of the population. In order to understand the scale of their threat, this study focuses on the concept of “violence” in the ideologies of the movements and members’ attitudes to the secular state, society and other Islamic movements, including ISIS.

## 1.1 Challenges of Islamization

The collapse of the Soviet Union has enhanced globalization process. Although this process started long ago, its profound development was constrained by the confrontation between two dominant ideologies in the world – communism and capitalism (Khaled, 2007). In the new era, the world has been gradually heading towards the unified informational, economic and political system (Popov, 2013). Within this system, the old ideological conflict between liberalism and totalitarianism has been replaced by the new conflicts of ideas and worldviews on gender, religious, moral, educational and other issues (ibid).

“The revival of Islamic identities and the emergence of new Muslim movements” have become a global trend in the post-Soviet world (Yom, 2002, p. 86) and challenged the positions of many experts who claimed that in the world of progressive secularization religion would stay on the periphery of public’s interest (Esposito, 1998). Processes of globalization enabled not only a free flow of goods and services but also an active exchange of religious dogmas, beliefs and practices. As a result, “religion has become a major ideological, social and political force” in many places (ibid, p. 19). The post-Soviet world, although put an end to the Cold War and bipolar world order, has not become a safer place. New challenges like the rise of terrorism and religious extremism have turned to become a global problem. For Kyrgyzstan which a quarter century ago embraced principles of democracy and opened to the world after being behind the “Iron Curtain” for 70 years the mentioned challenges cannot be considered less significant.

New opportunities of the globalized world and search for national identity in the post-Soviet period have facilitated the resurgence of Islam that is a traditional religion for Central Asian countries<sup>7</sup>. However, many experts also predicted the arrival of fundamentalist and radical interpretations of Islam from other Muslim countries. Indeed the majority of people in Kyrgyzstan who for centuries professed moderate Islam have met new forms of Islam brought into the country by various religious movements originated outside. It is noteworthy that Islam

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<sup>6</sup> The next chapter will give general characteristics of these movements.

<sup>7</sup> Central Asia includes five republics of the former Soviet Union: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan

is an umbrella term, which covers many differences within itself.<sup>8</sup> While majority of Muslims have similar beliefs concerning Allah, the Prophet Muhammad, and the Quran, a broad diversity exists when it comes to the interpretation of religious doctrines.<sup>9</sup> Variations in interpretations are the reason of the existence of numerous Islamic movements across the world. If in the early years of independence, the country welcomed the process of Islamization, as a search for national self-identification was largely associated with Islam, then later this process have attracted strong criticism from both the society and the government due to the spread of “radical” Islamic movements. The traditional system of values of moderate Islam has been gradually displaced to the side by the growing non-traditional religious and ideological programmes in Kyrgyzstan and acts of religious terrorism in the world are mainly associated with inherently violent nature of Islam by many people in the country. This has created discussions that Islamic renaissance is mainly characterized by the activities of Islamic movements whose members are “dedicated to establishing Islamic governments based on the principles of the Sharia<sup>10</sup> and using violence as a method of spreading militant and fanatical Islam” (Tazmini, 2010, p. 64).

## 1.2 Problem statement

In the last quarter century, the new Islamic movements have considerably diversified the religious picture of the country; for more than thousand years country has not seen such a variety of interpretations of Islam as it witnesses now. It is important to mention that historically Kyrgyz were one of the less religious Muslims in the Central Asian region and there were only several interpretations<sup>11</sup> of Islam. The state and majority of the population with apprehension view the current trends of Islamization in the country and concerns about “radical” ideologies of the religious groups are especially strengthened by the facts of Muslims from Kyrgyzstan joining ISIS.

Despite such concerns, Islamization is a matter of fact and, like it or not, growing number of Muslims who practice different versions of Islam have become an important and considerable component of the Kyrgyz society (Galdini, 2015). Ahmed (2009) emphasizes that “much is written about Muslims but we rarely seem to actually hear their voices” (p.7). This study, therefore, seeks to bring focus to the perspectives of the members of Islamic movements such as TJ, Salafi and HuT and their viewpoints on the connection between religion and

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<sup>8</sup> <http://theconversation.com/islams-silent-majority-moderate-voices-drowned-out-by-extremists-30706>

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> Sharia from Arabic - sacred law of Islam

<sup>11</sup> The next chapter will discuss the historical versions of Islamic practices on the territory of Kyrgyzstan.

violence. For the more comprehensive understanding of this connection, it seemed to be also necessary to consider it through the prism of relations of the members of the mentioned Islamic movements to the secular society, other Islamic movements and the state. By focusing on their reflections, the study, tries to understand the worldviews of marginalized groups and their potential inclination towards violent actions. In addition, this work analyzes attitudes, opinions of the experts from different fields about the activities of Islamic movements and Islamization process in the country. By focusing on the experts' perspectives, the study aims to understand how serious the threat of religious violence in the country is. This group of experts is represented by Imams, government official working in the religious sphere, security service employee and experts from the field of religious studies.

### **1.3 Research questions**

In the context of the above-mentioned data, the main question of the thesis is: How do ideologies of “radical” Islamic movements in Kyrgyzstan like Tabligi Jamaat, Salafi and Hizb ut-Tahrir explain violence in the name religion?

In order to disclose certain aspects of the main question there was a need to adapt other guiding sub-questions that were formulated in the following way:

- How “violent” are ideologies of these Islamic movements?
- What are the attitudes of the members of these Islamic movements towards the traditional/secular Muslims in the country?
- How members of the discussed Islamic movements respond to the criticism and pressure from the state?
- What do members think about the ideology and activities of the ISIS and other Islamic movements studied in this work?

In addition to understanding the possibility of religious violence by considering the relation to violence in the ideologies of “radical” Islamic movements, the study also aims to focus on the views of other representatives of Kyrgyzstan’s population (group of experts) about religious situation in the country and ideologies of Islamic movements.

- What does this group of respondents think about ideologies of “radical” Islamic movements in Kyrgyzstan?
- How serious is the threat of religious violence in contemporary Kyrgyzstan in their opinion?

## 1.4 Finding my thesis

Kyrgyzstan lives in an interesting era of changes. For more than a thousand-year history on the territory of Kyrgyzstan, Islam could not boast of so many devoted adherents as it has now. Yesterday’s stubborn atheist today becomes an ardent defender of Islamic values. Of them, people say: “he turned himself to Allah” or “she covered herself”. Among those who are not that scrupulous in following religious requirements such actions rise a wide range of emotions - frustration, surprise, fear, irritation, rarely indifference. Today, in Kyrgyzstan the number of mosques has already exceeded the number of schools, which is an undeniable evidence of the scale of Islamization.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps embracement of religion would be considered as a personal matter and would not attract much attention, if not the global terrorism that has come to be associated with Islam and endless debates about inherently violent nature of this religion had created a culture of suspicion.

More than a year ago, I came across with several videos circulating in the online social networks in the country. On the one video two members of ISIS, allegedly from Kyrgyzstan were declaring jihad to the President and to the country, on another video, a group of children from neighbouring Kazakhstan who joined ISIS with their parents were promising to kill all infidels. When the most violent group in the world sends such messages to the country that has never witnessed serious problems with religious violence, it can hardly leave one indifferent. What I saw evoked in me a feeling of fear since the enemy has never been so close and made me ask if the Islamization in the country has gone too far. I was curious to know if the religion could find many devotees in the country of a very moderate religiosity can it also easily inspire them to violence? The topic of ISIS and uncertain numbers of those who left the country to join this group activated numerous publications in the media and reactions<sup>13</sup> from the state. Islamic religious groups unofficially operating in the country were accused of inspiring people to join

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.voanews.com/content/more-mosques-than-schools-being-built-in-kyrgyzstan/3044830.html>

<sup>13</sup> The threat of ISIS is often mentioned in the statements of the President when security issues in the country are discussed.

- In February 2015, prominent Imam from Kara-Suu city was accused of being a member of the banned organization Hizb ut-Tahrir and for inspiring people to join “holy war” in Syria on the side of ISIS (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/18/kyrgyzstan-imam-encouraging-followers-fight-for-isis>)

- Those who return from war in Syria are usually imprisoned.

ISIS. In this regard, I decided to try to talk with members of several Islamic movements that were most exposed to criticism in the media and the state to see how “dangerous” they are.

### **1.5 Structure of the thesis**

The thesis is divided into 7 chapters. The next chapter will present a background of Islam in Kyrgyzstan with focus on the history of Islam, the contemporary religious situation and an overview of the Islamic religious movements selected to the study. Chapter 3 discusses and reflects on the methodological issues of the study. Chapter 4 presents the conceptual framework. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on informants’ data presentation and analysis. Finally, a summary and conclusion will be given in chapter 7.

## **Chapter 2. Background of Islam in Kyrgyzstan and “radical” Islamic movements**

The first section of this chapter will encompass three different periods of historical development of Islam in Kyrgyzstan. The first period is connected with the appearance of Islam on the territory of Kyrgyzstan and its gradual development from VIII<sup>th</sup> to XX<sup>th</sup> century. The second period is mainly characterized by the decline and stagnation in the development of Islam during the Soviet Union while the third period is marked by the unprecedented revival of this religion in the post-Soviet period. The second part of this chapter will have a more detailed focus on the contemporary religious situation in the country that has gained a controversial assessment in the society and the academia. In addition, a general portrait of the chosen movements like TJ, Salafi and HuT will be given in the final part of the chapter.

### **2.1 History of Islam in Kyrgyzstan**

#### **2.1.1 Islam in the pre-Soviet period**

More than a thousand years ago, perhaps no one was better positioned than those nations living in Central Asia on the crossroads of The Great Silk Road, where people could engage not only in trade relations but also in active exchange of cultural and religious values with different civilizations.<sup>14</sup> While Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Buddhism were flourishing on the territory of modern day Kyrgyzstan, in the VII<sup>th</sup> century on another part of the world a new religion preached by a small group of people was rapidly conquering hearts and new territories. By the X<sup>th</sup> century Arab merchants and missionaries succeeded in spreading Islam as a complete religious and political system among settled inhabitants of Central Asia, yet Islam did not take that deep roots among Kyrgyz nomadic tribes who preserved some heathen practices (Gunn, 2003). Brought by Arab merchants on the territory of modern Kyrgyzstan as early as in the VIII<sup>th</sup> century, this religion could accomplish conversion of Kyrgyz tribes around the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century (ibid). The reasons why it took so long to be accepted by local tribes are strong heathen traditions, nomadic lifestyle of the Kyrgyz that hampered development of Islamic centers like madrasas<sup>15</sup> and the fact that it was not forced upon the populations of Central Asia (Roy, 2000). However, it was not the dogmatic Islam originated on the Arabian Peninsula but rather adapted to the local traditions version (ibid). This adaptation resulted in several versions of Islam that are still practiced in Kyrgyzstan. Traditional religious orientation of Muslims in Central Asia

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<sup>14</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/27/opinion/moderate-islam-look-to-central-asia.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/27/opinion/moderate-islam-look-to-central-asia.html?_r=0)

<sup>15</sup> Madrasa from Arabic – Islamic religious school.

is often referred to as the Sunni Islam of Hanafi madhab<sup>16</sup> (Gunn, 2003). Rather flexible and tolerant traditions of this madhab like the suggestion that belief in God is more important than blind adherence to practices or relative tolerance in terms of punishment, divorce or expression of private opinion determined its success in spreading over the tribes residing in Central Asia (Haghayeghi, 1996, p. 80 cited in Gunn, 2003, p. 395). Gradually, teachings of Hanafi madhab absorbed some elements of local heathen traditions of nomadic tribes and Islam evolved in what is now called “traditional Islam” of the Kyrgyz. One of the illustrative examples of traditional Islam is the relation to the passed ancestors or saints, whose tombs are regularly visited and from whom people ask blessing and help while reciting the Quran (ibid). One of the Muslim respondents, who considers that traditional Islam does not reflect the true Islam, shared:

In Islam only Allah – the one God is the only one who helps and to whom people have to turn in prayers five times a day, and once a person passes away he is in the hands of Allah, thus, there is no need to visit his tomb or moreover, ask for help. It is a big sin, but they do not care.

Along with the Hanafi madhab’s interpretation of Islam, Sufism was particularly popular among Kyrgyz tribes. Petros (2004) writes, that “Sufism appealed to the nomadic peoples by emphasizing a direct experience with God, as well as preaching tolerance and respect for other forms of worship” (p. 141). Typically, “they preached asceticism and abstinence, which, together with contemplation, were designed to bring man closer to God. In many respects their beliefs and practices were essentially animistic rather than Islamic in origin, tracing back to the rituals of ancient local cults” (Ro’i, 2000, pp. 386-87 cited in Gunn, 2003 p. 397). Gradual adaptation to Islam that stretched for many centuries was rather effective, although it was not the version initially presented by the Arabs, the majority of the Kyrgyz tribes identified themselves as Sunni Muslims when they entered the Russian Empire in the end of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century.

### **2.1.2 Islam during the Soviet period.**

The territory of the modern Kyrgyzstan was under the rule of Russians for more than hundred years. First from 1876 to 1917 when tribes living on the territory of Central Asia were conquered by the Russian Empire that existed until 1917, then from 1917 to 1991 under the

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<sup>16</sup> Madhab is a school of thought of the particular Imam. Generally, Sunni Muslims follow one of the four madhabs named after their founders (Imams): Hanafi, Shafi’i, Maliki, Hanbali. These schools have own interpretations of the Quran and Sunna (records of the teachings, deeds and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) that compose the jurisprudence of each madhab. (<http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/nuh/madhab.htm>)

rule of communism in the Soviet Union, established on the ruins of the Russian Empire (Engvall, 2011). During the rule of the Russian Empire, the tribes in Central Asia did not experience serious restrictions in terms of religious practices. However, for most of the Soviet period practicing Islam was largely discouraged by officialdom, just as any other religion (Petros, 2004). Gunn (2003) notes that “during Soviet times, there was a severe restriction on importing literature, operating mosques, and teaching which led to a virtual seventy-year freeze on knowledge of developments in Islam” (p. 396). Particularly severe persecution of any religious practices in the Soviet Union fell on the period of militant atheism in the late 1920s (Bajorek, 2013). This had serious consequences for the whole Islamic tradition practiced for many centuries in Central Asia. According to Bajorek (2013), Ulama<sup>17</sup> was almost extinguished that resulted in the destruction of the system of religious knowledge production and its further transmission. The rest of the Ulama as a class, was deprived of privileges and its former prestige was no longer attractive for younger generations. Mosques and madrasas were either destroyed or transformed into more socially useful centers like schools or workers’ clubs. (Khalid, 2007, p. 81 cited in Bajorek, 2013, p. 13). Due to the nomadic lifestyle of the Kyrgyz tribes the role of the Ulama, mainly represented by Sufi sheikhs was especially important in the transmission of knowledge. Knowledge was mainly shared not in the mosques or madrasas like among other settled inhabitants of Central Asia but through the allegiance to the Ulama who “belonged to lineages that had 'brought Islam' to the community generations before” (Khalid, 2007, p. 33 cited in Bajorek, 2013, p. 13). When this religious community underwent Soviet’s religious cleansing, nomadic tribes of Central Asia lost almost their entire religious infrastructure and national identity mainly associated with Islam was replaced with mass sovietization of minds (Bajorek, 2013).

Yet it would be wrong to suppose that during the Soviet period there was a total spiritual vacuum. The crisis of the Ulama localized Islam to the family unit and religion became synonymous with tradition and a form of belonging to a particular ethnicity rather than a personal belief or observance of practice (Gunn, 2003). According to Bajorek (2004) after the initial suppression of Islam in 1920s, Soviet power later in 1950s started to co-opt rather than eradicate Islam as it did not present a threat and was not something to be destroyed at all costs. During the 1980s with the advent of “glasnost”<sup>18</sup> the Soviet Union liberalized its attitude towards religious policy which facilitated gradual revival of different religions as well as arrival

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<sup>17</sup> Ulama from Arabic - the “class” of religious people, mainly scholars who play significant role in disseminating religious knowledge

<sup>18</sup> Glasnost from Russian language – publicity. In 1980 it was a popular slogan and course on “openness” and government transparency in the Soviet Union.



of new unknown religious movements (Petros, 2004). Despite the influence of strong heathen traditions in the pre-Soviet period and suppression during the Soviet period, Islam could adapt to changing realities and witness its own revival in the next period.

### **2.1.3 Islam in the post-Soviet period.**

*In the post-Cold War era, with the collapse of Marxist-Leninist ideologies, it is (to me, anyway) quite astonishing the degree to which religion has “returned” as a major driving force and prominent feature of the 21st century.<sup>19</sup>*  
(Lehmann, 2015)

After the independence was obtained in 1991, Kyrgyzstan, headed by the reform-minded President Akaev<sup>20</sup> chose the path of democratization with the aim to become a “Switzerland of Central Asia”. This comparison was not only based on the similarities of the landscapes but also on the desire to attain success like in the western world. Liberalization, that blanked previous restrictions affected many spheres of a person’s life, including the religious. The new Constitution declared the main principle of the new secular state – separation of religion from the state, and at the same time granted freedom of belief and religious practices for every citizen of the country. Besides, the policy of “open up” and ambitious liberal government of the newly emerged country attracted financial and ideological support not only from the Western countries but also from the Muslim world, which found ample room for religious activities in the country where the majority of the population identified themselves as Muslims (Louw, 2007). However, most Muslims “possessed only a rudimentary knowledge of Islamic teachings” (Gunn, 2003, p. 390) and the first Islamic missionaries who arrived mainly from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey introduced their own versions of Islam (Nasritdinov & Esenamanova, 2014). The role of external actors was crucial in the re-Islamization of the country. In addition to the building of mosques, madrasas, disseminations of religious literature, foreign actors provided opportunities for members of religious movements to have religious training abroad (ibid).

Louw (2007) writes that, although Constitutions of all Central Asian governments enshrine the separation of religion from state, countries had to replace the utopian ideology of the Soviet Union with the new one, which would serve the needs of the state and act as a national ideology. Therefore, Islam as a traditional religion in the region gained particular support from

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jplehmann/2015/10/04/is-the-21st-century-the-century-of-religion/#153796627272>

<sup>20</sup> Later, in 2005 Akaev and his family, accused of large-scale corruption were forced to flee the country after the first state revolution

the governments. From the micro-level perspective, many people failed to adapt to the new realities of a rapidly changing world (Heyat, 2014). The shock from the collapse of unshakeable ideals of communism, difficult transition period to the market economy, rapid changes in the socio-political sphere turned peoples' lives upside down. Here, religion came back giving people some meaning and offering an alternative way to cope with the problems, through spiritual practices (ibid).

Perhaps, the most telling example of the Islamic revival is primarily expressed visually: a booming number of mosques that increased from 39 in 1990 to 2362 in 2014 (Galdini, 2015), several higher Islamic institutions operating in the country, a growing number of young women demonstrating commitment to Islam by wearing hijabs and bearded men doing door-to-door preaching and distributing religious literature. Other world religions and new religious sects and movements had unimpeded development as well, but it is the radicalization of Muslims in the country that is on the forefront of the country's attention.

## **2.2 Radicalization of Muslims**

### **2.2.1 "Discourse on danger"**

*For the right, Islam represents barbarism; for the left, medieval theocracy; for the center, a kind of distasteful exoticism. In all camps, however, there is agreement that even though little enough is known about the Islamic world there is not much to be approved of there.*

*(Said, 1981, p. XV)*

The contemporary religious situation in the country is characterized by the dominance of discourse on the radicalization of Muslims. Since activities of religious movements are considered through the prism of radicalization, I find it relevant to pay attention to this problem.

Events of 11 September 2001 galvanized studies on terrorism and particularly on violence perpetrated in the name of religion by religiously motivated people. The subsequent rise of terrorist attacks enhanced opinions that there is a strong relation between Islam and violence. Many countries including Kyrgyzstan are disquieted about nature, causes of such acts, and adapt their security and religious policies to the new realities. The withdrawal of the American Military base from the territory of Kyrgyzstan, which gave some sense of security, a troublesome neighbourhood with Afghanistan, the visible rise of the Islamization processes, facts of Kyrgyz citizens participating in ISIS activities fuel fears among ordinary citizens and the government about the possibility of religious violence in Kyrgyzstan. Democratic, secular Kyrgyzstan, which is considered as the most tolerant of various religions and open country

among Central Asian countries recently have started to demonstrate toughening of its religious freedom policies and activate programmes on counter-terrorism against religious groups and movements (Omelicheva, 2011). A statement of the President Atambaev during the meeting of Defense Council in November 2014 signaled the gravity of the problem and the state's critical position.

Recent events in the Middle East, the creation of the so-called Islamic State group, the actions of extremists that are incompatible with basic human norms, force us to reconsider our approaches and demand a fundamental review of methods and principles of interaction between the state and religion. Society must clearly understand that too much Islamization will lead directly to mankurtization<sup>21,22</sup>

On the same meeting speaking in the context of activities of non-traditional Islamic movements that pose a danger for local traditions, Atambaev expressed the following:<sup>23</sup>

I want to refer to certain Moldos<sup>24</sup>, politicians and say the following: “Do not force Kyrgyz people to such actions<sup>25</sup>. Do not impose on Kyrgyz people foreign clothing, language, traditions! If you do not like Kyrgyz people, their land, nobody is against if you live among people and in a country which you like”.

For example, concerning the TJ movement – the most numerous Islamic movement in terms of followers in the country, security services claim that they have proofs that “members of this organization preach a distorted version of Islam, almost indistinguishable from the ideology of Jihadists of Wahhabi and Salafi kind, which is preached by all terrorists. According to some experts, 80% of Islamic extremists come from this movement”<sup>26</sup>

The media in Kyrgyzstan is claimed to be the most free in Central Asia<sup>27</sup> and unlike in neighbouring countries is not exposed to serious pressure and total control from the government. Government's actions pass through a scrutiny of the media and often end with criticism. However, on the question of the raising radicalization of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan, the media expresses solidarity with the position of the government. Alarming headings like “Islamization in Kyrgyzstan is a time bomb”,<sup>28</sup> “Radical Islamization threatens Kyrgyzstan”,<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Mankurt – a term that refers to a Kyrgyz legend, where mankurt is an unthinking slave who does not remember his roots, mother, homeland.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Paraszczuk <http://www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-kyrgyzstan-special-threat/26674192.html>

<sup>23</sup> My translation from <http://kloop.kg/blog/2014/11/03/atambaev-radikalnaya-islamizatsiya-ugrozhaet-kyrgyzskoj-samobytnosti/>

<sup>24</sup> Moldo from Kyrgyz language means a person who has Islamic religious education.

<sup>25</sup> In the context of imposition of religion by religious movements

<sup>26</sup> My translation from <http://ru.sputnik.kg/society/20151208/1020730095.html#ixzz3zxISV69E>

<sup>27</sup> <http://vof.kg/?p=18549>

<sup>28</sup> My translation from <http://www.stanradar.com/news/full/4654-islamizatsija-kyrgyzstana-bomba-zamedlennogo-dejstvija.html>

<sup>29</sup> My translation from <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1435643820>

“Kyrgyzstan struggles with rise of female Islamists”<sup>30</sup> reflect the seriousness of the problem in a more expressive way. Therefore, there is an opinion in the society that Islamization fostered by members of “radical” Islamic movements pose a genuine security threat as they “consider it part of their responsibility before Allah to undermine infidel society in order to pave the way for the imposition of Sharia”.<sup>31</sup> According to the State Commission on religious affairs, among 19 banned religious groups in the country 16 are Islamic movements.<sup>32</sup>

### **2.2.2 What is radicalization?**

However, some researchers are not that unambiguous about the dangers of religious radicalization. Alimjanov (2016) notes that there were very few cases of religious violence and evidences of radical ideologies spreading to the wider society in the Central Asian region since 1991. For him, the problem of radicalization lies in a different plane related to the ambiguity of the term “radicalization” itself.

There are many definitions of this concept, but none of them are universally accepted. For example, European commission defines it as “the phenomenon of people embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism” (cited in Veldhuis & Staun, 2009, p. 6). According to the Swedish Security Service radicalization can be both “a process that leads to ideological or religious activism to introduce radical change to society”, and a “process that leads to an individual or group using, promoting or advocating violence for political aims” (cited in Ranstrop, 2009, p.2). The US Department of homeland security has the following definition: “The process of adopting an extremist belief system, including the willingness to use, support, or facilitate violence, as a method to effect social change”.<sup>33</sup> A recently adopted Concept of state policy in the sphere of religion in Kyrgyzstan lacks the definition of radicalization that enables a rather free interpretation of this term. In research which attempts to understand reflections on radicalization in Kyrgyzstan, Alimjanov (2016) conducts interviews with the state officials, media representatives, security services and ordinary people. His findings suggest that there is no clear understanding of what radicalization is. For one it is an appearance of a bearded man with a gun on TV and who is a role model for young Muslims, for second it is opposition to state and an aspiration to have a state based on Sharia law, for third it is everything that is beyond traditional Islam. Also, such terms like

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/70046>

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.jihadwatch.org/2011/04/islamic-movement-of-kyrgyzstan-misunderstands-islam-seeks-to-undermine-social-political-and-economic>

<sup>32</sup> [http://www.religion.gov.kg/ru/not\\_registration\\_union.html](http://www.religion.gov.kg/ru/not_registration_union.html)

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/110/hr1955/text>

Islamization, radicalization, fundamentalism, violent extremism, and terrorism are used as interchangeable terms in responses of informants. He argues that a broad interpretation of this term might put a country in a risk of categorizing the growing number of pious Muslims as dangerous without distinguishing those with moderate, violent or non-violent ideologies.

### **2.2.3 Clash of ideologies**

According to McBrien and Pelkmans (2008) the “discourse on danger” emerged due to the different worldviews of secular or traditional Muslims<sup>34</sup> and a new group of those for whom Islam is a complete way of life, with all its complexity of practices and regulations. The authors write that secular/traditional Islam was formed under the Soviet past. The Soviet regime being successful in dismantling religious structures, however, ignored the expression of religion in the private sphere, where proper Muslim behaviour and religious practices were associated with keeping “domestic” rituals and celebrating certain Muslim holidays. These aspects of Muslim life were considered as markers of national identity and ethnicity. Such “Muslimness” had been “stripped of much of its ‘religious’ content” and was compatible with Soviet ideology and secularism (ibid, p. 90). Therefore, traditional Muslims today represent an interesting phenomenon – “Atheist Muslims”, who do not observe most of religious practices, may not believe in God, but consider themselves as Muslims because of ethnic belonging and follow of traditional Islamic rituals such as making Islamic marriages, circumcisions, reciting Quranic verses during big events. On the other side, there is a growing number of those who also claim to be Muslims but the expression of their religion differs from the traditional. They are usually members of different Islamic movements with an alien ideology, they try to follow all religious practices and have distinct external characteristics like Islamic clothing, beards. According to the authors, members of new Islamic movements contradict the traditional perception of “Muslimness” and since they do not fit in common frames, they are a priori regarded as dangerous and labelled as extremists. In the center of misunderstanding is not the “violent ideologies” but the fear that alternative ways of “Muslimness” would “endanger familiar way of experiencing Islam and of identifying oneself as Muslim” (ibid, p. 88). According to opinions of secular Muslims shared during interviews with the authors, all new practicing Muslims in the country are radical Wahhabis sponsored from abroad and compelling their women to wear hijab. Russian anthropologist Abashin (2002) writes that there is an opposition between “traditionalism” and “fundamentalism” in the post-Soviet Central Asia. The first group is

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<sup>34</sup> Hereinafter under the notion of “traditional Muslims” I also imply secular Muslims

considered as liberal, moderate, respectful of local traditions while the second group is deviant, backward and dangerous. His study reflects that there is no clear understanding of the movements' goals and ideologies among secular society and people considered as "radicals" once they start to pray or put on Islamic clothing.

## **2.3 "Radical" Islamic Movements in Kyrgyzstan**

### **2.3.1 Tablighi Jamaat**

TJ is a proselytizing Islamic movement founded in India in 1926. It has more than 80 million of followers that makes it the largest Islamic missionary movement in the world.<sup>35</sup> According to the ideology of TJ, condition of Muslims and society as a whole can be improved based on the regular worship, correction of the moral behavior and performance of dawah (Balci, 2015). The concept of dawah is the main characteristic of the movement and means "to call people on the path of Islam or to spread the message of Islam" (ibid). Burki (2012) writes, that the founder of this movement Maulana Kandhalawi, the Islamic scholar from India, was concerned about growing ignorance of Indian Muslims about their faith, since most of them did not read the Quran, did not attend prayers at mosques or simply did not know how to pray. Moreover, many Hindus who converted to Islam were still practicing some Hindi religious traditions. His purpose in establishing this movement was to teach and explain Islam for Muslims<sup>36</sup> themselves, rather than to convert non-Muslims. The TJ members are guided by the Kandhalawi's simple slogan: "Aye Musalmano! Musalman bano" (from Urdu: "Oh Muslims, be Muslims!") (cited in Burki, 2012, p. 100).

The main principle of TJ is the noninvolvement in to any political matters (Balci, 2015; Burki, 2012; Alexiev, 2005). This principle was formed under the context of the colonial India (Burki, 2012). At that time, India was going through the anticolonial war and various movements turned to Kandhalawi to join the resistance. However, he categorically forbade members of his group any involvement into political sphere, considering that problem of Muslims cannot be solved by political means (Balci, 2015) and he thought that any political struggle would only aggravate the existing tension between Hindi and Muslims communities (Nasritdinov & Esenamanova, 2014).

First missionaries from this movement arrived to the Central Asian countries around 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Apolitical and pious group did not face much criticism

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<sup>35</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/sep/08/religion-islam-tablighi-jamaat>

<sup>36</sup> His idea was that Muslims should know and practice own religion first before introducing it to non-Muslims.

at those years and even considered as an antidote to the spread of other radical religious movements. However, later this movement was recognized as an extremist and banned on the territory of Russia and other Central Asian countries except Kyrgyzstan. Today, it is the biggest religious movement in Kyrgyzstan and has own cells in every village in the country. Members usually call themselves as “dawatchy” in Kyrgyz language or “dawatchik” in Russian – those who spread faith. Dawatchys can be recognized by their Pakistani style clothing<sup>37</sup> and be met during their door-to-door preaching<sup>38</sup>. TJ is not officially registered in the country, thus does not have the program, the Charter and there is no statistics on the number of followers (Nasritdinov & Esenamanova, 2014). However, they have a clear internal structure and organization is run by the hierarchic system of mashvara (religious meetings), which covers almost all mosques in the country (ibid). It is largely discussed in the country that the movement has not been forbidden yet because the official Islamic clergy in Kyrgyzstan itself is represented by the members of TJ, moreover the grand-mufti<sup>39</sup> of Kyrgyzstan Toktomushev is the former leader of TJ movement. Balci (2015) writes that TJ in Kyrgyzstan “seeks first and foremost to reach out to young people, especially the poor and unemployed, divert them from bad habits (alcohol and drugs) and introduce them to the most important basics of Islam: how to pray and read the Quran and to engage in missionary activity that brings new recruits to the community”.

### **2.3.2 Salafi movement**

The word “Salaf” from Arabic is translated as a "predecessor" or “ancestor” and refers to the early generations of followers of the Prophet Muhammad<sup>40</sup> (Rumman, 2014). This early generations are represented by the first three generations of Muslims<sup>41</sup> who are considered to be exemplary for Salafis<sup>42</sup>. Salafis see this period as a golden age of the pure form of Islam that should be followed by all Muslims today.

There is no particular date when the Salafism emerged, however different Islamic scholars in different times contributed to the development of this movement (Bonney, 2011). One of the first religious scholar who called for purification of Islam and reforms was Ibn

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<sup>37</sup> Knee-length dresses and wide trousers

<sup>38</sup> According to the explanation from the members (interviewees) of TJ, this movement recommends new members to go to three days dawah tour at least once in a month, and gradually extend the length of dawah from 40 days to 4 months in a year. During dawah tour, person lives in one of the mosques in own country or if he has financial capability he is highly recommended to go to 40 days or 4 months dawah to Pakistan, Bangladesh or India (centers of TJ). While in the mosque person receives religious education and with a small group of other dawatchys, daily goes to door to door dawah (usually for several hours a day) to preach Islam or call people to come to mosque. The group is usually headed by experienced and knowledgeable dawaatchy – the leader of the group.

<sup>39</sup> The head of official Muslim clergy

<sup>40</sup> Prophet Muhammad (570 - 632)

<sup>41</sup> This concept is rooted in the words of the Prophet Muhammad who said: “The best generation is mine, then the following one, then the next” (Rumman, 2014, p. 44).

<sup>42</sup> Salafis - adherents of Salafism

Taymiyya (1263-1328), whose teachings many Salafis follow today. Another prominent figure in Salafism is Abd al-Wahhab (1703-92) the founder of Wahhabism or Jihadi branch of Salafism (ibid).

Salafis share a common religious creed (aqida) that addresses fundamental questions like the role of human reason, the nature of God and of the Quran (Rumman, 2014). Creed provides guiding principles and procedures for building religious positions on various issues. The concept of tawhid<sup>43</sup> has a central place in the Salafis' creed and includes three components, which are necessary to be accepted to become a "real Muslim" (Wiktorowicz, 2006). The first component is the belief that God is the only creator and master of the universe, second is that God is supreme and unique and third is that God is the only one who has to be worshiped. The concept of shirk which means worshipping something or somebody other than God derives from this third component, and shirk is considered as the greatest sin, according Salafis. On matters of shirk Salafis hold a critical position towards other religions, especially paganism and any kind of idolatry (Bunzel, 2015).

In his work "Anatomy of the Salafi movement" Wiktorowicz (2006) writes that despite "all Salafis share a puritanical approach to the religion intended to eschew religious innovation by strictly replicating the model of the Prophet Muhammad" (p. 207) this movement is not homogenous and represents diversified and complex community. Groups in this community differ based on their positions towards jihad, apostasy and methods of activities. In this regards, Wiktotowicz (2006) distinguishes three types of Salafis "the purists, the politics, and the Jihadis" (p. 208). The purists or also called as "the quietist", while strictly following the Quran and Sunna (the collections of the speech and deeds of Prophet Mohamad), support non-violent methods in application of Islam and in considering involvement into politics as deviance resemble the TJ's position. Politics, on the contrary, emphasize the need to bring religion into politics since the God is the only source of legislation and on the political arena, his laws will have great impact on building social justice. However, this group calls for peaceful political activism and often HuT party which has similar goal is considered to be Salafi. The third group is Jihadis who have a more militant position and call for immediate struggle against oppressors, regardless if they are Muslims or not. Al-Qaeda is often referred to this branch of Salafism. All three branches emerged from Saudi Arabia and since 1970 Salafism has flourished all over the world as the oil boom provided substantial funds for the spread of the Salafi ideology of various branches (Rumman, 2014).

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<sup>43</sup> Tawhid is the concept of monotheism or the affirmation of the unity of God.



Unlike other religious movements in the country, not much has been written about Salafism in Kyrgyzstan in academics. In work “Religious security in Kyrgyzstan” Nasritdinov and Esenamova (2014) ask opinions of various experts about religious movements in the country; their findings show that Salafism and HuT are considered as the most dangerous. For example, the ex-Mufti Egemberdiev thinks that this movement is guided by the idea to destroy traditional life and religion in the country and Salafis do not support the state, unlike the traditional Islam. However, Sharif the head of the Hajj department of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan considers this movement as moderate and that Salafis in Kyrgyzstan are not interested in getting involved in to politics. In the local media coverage, the movement often named as Salafi-Jihadi and has sharply negative image.<sup>44</sup> It is argued that the movement calls for civil unrest,<sup>45</sup> imposes radical ideology, is driven by fanaticism and the idea to build a Caliphate in Kyrgyzstan<sup>46</sup>. In addition, the sky rocketing number of mosques in the country is mainly associated with the sponsorship from Arabic countries who aim to have a political influence in other places by exporting own ideology of Wahhabism.<sup>47</sup> Salafi groups or organizations are not registered in Kyrgyzstan and probably will never be, since all banned Islamic groups in Kyrgyzstan like Al-Qaeda, IS, Taliban and others are claimed to be terroristic with Salafi-Jihadi ideology.

### **2.3.3 Hizb ut-Tahrir**

HuT was founded in 1953 in Jerusalem by Taqiuddin an-Nabhani a famous Islamic scholar and an appeals court judge.<sup>48</sup> HuT is a transnational movement that sees itself not as a religious movement but as a political party based on Islamic principles (Karagiannis, 2005). HuT calls all Muslim countries to unite under the single Islamic state – the Caliphate (ibid). It spreads own ideas through dissemination of published materials, pamphlets and extensively uses Internet (ibid).

The political doctrine of HuT is founded on two principles (Valentine, 2010). The first, is the Sharia - Islamic law that regulates all aspects of person’s life – political, economic, social and other aspects. The second is an Islamic state, as a just society can be built only within this entity. Therefore, these principles, which represent the fundamentalist Islam involve unique combination of religion and politics where faith and state are inseparable.

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<sup>44</sup><http://stanradar.com/news/full/18802-chem-grozit-kyrgyzstanu-propaganda-tabligi-dzhaamat-.html>

<http://www.fergananews.com/articles/8029>

<http://delo.kg/index.php/religiya/5641-religioznost-rastjot-a-dukhovnosti-net>

<sup>45</sup> <http://ia-centr.ru/expert/17638/>

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.ca-portal.ru/article:5923>

<sup>47</sup> <http://delo.kg/index.php/health-7/6729-u-kyrgyzstana-poyavilsya-novyj-drug-vakhkhabitskaya-saudovskaya-araviya>

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/hizb-ut-tahrir.htm>

According to the official web page of the party, the building of the Caliphate and liberation of Muslims requires a struggle against colonialism and eradication of its economic, political, military and cultural roots from the Islamic territories.<sup>49</sup> HuT argues that its rise was a response to the calling of Allah: “And let there arise from amongst you a band that calls to the good and commands what is right and forbids what is evil and those are the ones who will attain felicity” Quran (3:104) (ibid). In attainment of its goal, HuT claims not to use “any physical actions nor any violent acts” because the current reality resembles the time of the Prophet Muhammad in Makkah when he worked towards establishment of the rule of Islam in the Kufar (non-believer) run city by non-violent means (ibid).

Valentine (2010) argues that although the movement does not promote or engage in violence, their fundamentalist ideology acts as a conduit for young members to join more extreme groups. Karagiannis (2005), writes that “Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami (The Party of Islamic Liberation) is among the most feared Islamic groups in Central Asia, but it is also, apparently, the least understood” (p. 137). HuT is banned in all Central Asian countries and in some Middle Eastern countries, while in Europe its activities are forbidden only in Russia and Germany (Valentine, 2010). In Kyrgyzstan HuT was recognized to be extremist and banned in 2003. Despite this fact, the group continues to operate clandestine and based on the regular reports about arrested members, it is rather active. Ideology of HuT is particularly appealing to Uzbek minority in the country who were traditionally more religious due to sedentary way of life and their wish to have a broader political autonomy in Kyrgyzstan finds support in the party’s idea of just society (Zenn, 2012). Alexeev argues that in the 1990 mainly Uzbeks were members of HuT who run from the repressive regime of the president Karimov in the neighboring Uzbekistan. Unpopular reforms of the state, high levels of corruption later made many Kyrgyz join HuT as well. The party argues that the main causes of social problems in Kyrgyzstan are a lack of religious fidelity, corrupted secular system, western manipulations and the absence of universal Muslim community (Karagiannis, 2005 ). Therefore in Kyrgyzstan the party struggles for the return to “an idealized religion-based community and promotes a utopian view of an Islamic state in which social problems such as corruption and poverty would be banished by the application of sharia law” (ibid, p. 145).

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<sup>49</sup> <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/index.php/EN/def>

## **Chapter 3. Methodological framework**

The purpose of this chapter is to present the methods used for better understanding of the research topic and provide a rationale for the chosen methods. This chapter focuses on the study areas, selection of respondents, data collection methods and self-reflection. Taking into account that interviews were carried out with the members of Islamic religious movements, particular attention will be paid to my insider and outsider role during data collection.

### **3.1 Study areas**

Since a researcher cannot be everywhere at once, determining the study area becomes an important task, however, making a choice in favor of a particular area may evoke regrets about possible benefits of other locations. On the stage of planning the fieldwork, I was caught in a dilemma, as the process of Islamization is active in every part of the country, it was hard to define a particular area, which could best suit my research purposes. When the decision to search for members of “radical” Islamic movements in online social networks was made, I noticed that Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, was indicated as a place of residence in many profiles of potential informants. In view of the limited time of the fieldwork, the fact that I was from the same city and some characteristics of Bishkek discussed below determined my choice.

Bishkek is a vibrant urban center, inhabited by 1 million people, which makes it the biggest and the most populated area in the country. Being the administrative, financial and educational center Bishkek attracts many people from different parts of the country, who on their turn contribute to the already diverse religious and ethnical picture of the city. Since no other city in the country is represented by such variety of religions and ethnicities, as well as administrative and educational agencies, it does not seem to be surprising that most of my informants I recruited online appeared to live in the capital.

Besides, two unplanned interviews were carried out in Kara-Kol city. As a participant in the summer school jointly organized by the American University in Central Asia and the Arctic University of Norway in Cholpon-Ata city (Issyk-Kul region) in Kyrgyzstan, I was assigned to undertake a short fieldwork related to the topic of my interest. Lacking any preliminary agreed appointments, I was guided by hope that random meetings could be helpful in finding respondents directly on place. I decided to visit Kara-Kol instead of having a fieldwork in Cholpon-Ata, as the latter is mainly a touristic city. Situated two hours drive from Cholpon-Ata, Kara-Kol is the administrative center of the Issyk-Kul region with a population of 80 thousand people, which makes it the second biggest city in the north of the country after

Bishkek. Besides, the presence of a Dungan<sup>50</sup> village, whose inhabitants are mainly practicing Muslims of Chinese origin, influenced my choice. Also, I had one online interview with a person living in Sweden and the reason why he was included in the list of respondents will be explained in the “Gaining access” section.

## **3.2 Informants**

### **3.2.1 Defining key informants**

As it was mentioned in the previous chapter, there is a strong opinion in the country that Islamization means radicalization and that activities of Islamic religious movements pose a particular threat. Mainly, arguments are built on interpretations of statistical data or visual observations like the growth of women in hijabs, the number of mosques and the growing number of people joining ISIS and “radical” Islamic movements in the country. Acknowledging the importance of such data in knowledge construction, I was, however, interested in those who actually themselves represent these movements.

Researchers who attempt to understand the particular phenomenon are usually aided by knowledgeable individuals from the field. They can be referred to as key informants – those who have an expert information (Bryman, 2012). Since the aim of this work is to understand the scale and seriousness of threats emanating from ideologies and actions of religious movements in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, it was important to see the problem “through the eyes” of members of these groups. Therefore, on the stage of planning I determined to speak to members of “radical” religious movements - possessors of unique knowledge about their religion and practices.

The aim of purposive sampling is to “sample participants in a strategic way, so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions” (Bryman, 2012, p. 418). By applying purposive sampling, I narrowed my key informants to members of Islamic movements like TJ, Salafi and HuT. Despite the presence of other Islamic groups and movements in the country, these movements were selected according to their large number of followers, the frequency of critical references they attract in the media and in statements by government officials, and the general perception that they represent threat in the society.

However, the selection of informants were not limited to members of “radical” movements only. To avoid confusion, key informants were divided in two groups - main and second. Main group had to be members of the above-mentioned movements, as their opinion is

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<sup>50</sup> Dungsans – Muslim people of Chinese origin who migrated from China to the territory of Central Asia in late 19 century.

a primary data source on what is going on among religious grass roots. In order to meet criteria of the second group informants had to be involved in religious affairs of the country from the state level or in research on Islam or of the religious groups. Besides, Imams who, due to the specifics of their job reach hearts and minds of people through Islam were included in second group as well. Though, not in the central focus of this study, opinions from the members of the second group were important for a better understanding of the studied phenomena and the general religious situation in the country.

### **3.2.2 Number of informants**

15 interviews took place during the fieldwork that lasted from 5 of June until 20 of July 2015 and another 2 in December 2015 during a winter trip to Kyrgyzstan. There were ten interviews with main group, among whom three were TJ members, four followers of Salafi movement, and three members of HuT party. In addition, there were seven interviews with second group, represented by one government official, one from security services, three from academia and two Imams.

This number of informants (17) indicates the qualitative nature of the study. The information collected does not represent rigorous data that can be generalized to the larger population. According to Mason (2010), “qualitative research is concerned with meaning and not making generalized hypothesis statements” (p. 2). Since a qualitative method enables one to study in depth a person’s views and experience, and as in my case, the complexity of the spiritual world, generalization was not a priority. On the stage of planning, it was expected that it would not be easy to recruit members of Islamic movements that are highly criticized in society, however the reality proved to be different. Since a majority of the target respondents were recruited online, I had a feeling that effectiveness of online recruitment can help to find required number of informants. However, what sample size makes “good” data? In qualitative studies researchers usually follow the concept of saturation – “when the collection of new data does not shed any further light on the issue under investigation” (Mason, 2010, p.2). Although no easy task to target people from different religious movements was set, common patterns in answers and references to certain Islamic dogmas and values made me consider them as a homogenous group of practicing Muslims who share close opinions, despite group differences. Once the data showed a tendency to repeat itself, I could see that the data had probably reached saturation point. However, the concept of saturation has attracted much criticism as well. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), saturation is a “matter of degree” (p. 136). They suggest that the longer researcher works with his data or collects it there will always be

something new to discover and it is likely that other researcher may need another sample size on the same topic to claim saturation.

### **3.2.3 Gaining access to informants**

A common way to gain access to informants is through gatekeepers – people who can facilitate your data collection by introducing the researcher to relevant informants or act themselves as such (Bryman, 2012). In my case, finding gatekeepers or using personal connections seemed problematic, since HuT was banned in 2003 and activities of the group went underground, while TJ and Salafi movements are not registered officially. According to Finzel (2013) some specific groups are simply not easy, if not impossible, to find and contact with traditional recruiting methods. Advances in internet technologies have opened online recruitment opportunities for researchers doing both qualitative and quantitative studies (Wesolowsky, 2014). Online forums and social networks open an entry into the “hidden worlds of sensitive issues and social taboos” (Wesolowsky, 2014, p. 9), provide an access to the wider population and can be time and money saving (Hamilton & Bowers, 2006). In my situation, online social networks like Facebook appeared to be rather helpful. Long before this research interest was determined, I noticed a growing activity of Muslims in online social networks. In the country where 90% of people identify themselves with this religion, such activity might not be that surprising. However, there is a clear distinction between traditional Muslims and growing number of practicing Muslims; for the first group, religion like in the Soviet Union continues to be a marker of ethnic identity, while for the second Islam defines a complete way of life. The latter are usually members of Islamic movements and can be recognized based on distinct characteristics they have online. Usually, profiles of most members of different Islamic movements lack personal photos but instead have many religious expressions, pictures and videos. Movements often have own group pages as well. For example, HuT in Kyrgyzstan has its own Facebook page and the majority of those who put “like” or leave comments there are members of the party or sympathizers. Probably, the most distinct profile sign of HuT members is a Black Flag<sup>51</sup> with the Shahada - a testimony that confirms that Islam is a monotheistic religion and that Muhammad is God’s Prophet. The Salafi movement has many online groups that are seldom named as Salafi, but references to famous Salafi scholars like Ibn Taymiyyah or al-Fawzaan, discussions of the concept of bidah<sup>52</sup> or tawhid<sup>53</sup> make them easily recognizable. If personal

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<sup>51</sup> The popular attribute of ISIS like black flag also has a Shahada on it, but the style of the flag differs from that of HuT.

<sup>52</sup> In Islam, Bidah (Arabic) refers to any innovations in religious matters.

<sup>53</sup> In Islam, Tawhid (Arabic) means unity or oneness of God. It is one of the most fundamental foundation stones of Islam.

profiles or Islamic group pages do not share above-mentioned characteristics except posts on general Islamic topics, photos or videos on religious themes, it is most likely that they belong to either TJ members or those who do not refer themselves to any group.

One of the positive sides of recruiting via Facebook, as far as I can judge, it is an opportunity for potential informants to study the researchers profile as well, which can grant some element of trust. Also, the Islamic way of greeting a person<sup>54</sup> and referring to a hadith<sup>55</sup> which calls every Muslim to look for true knowledge and help those who seek it, were included in online letters to the potential informant along with a question about his/her affiliation with the Islamic movement to which I expected he/she belongs. I assume that this demonstrated some degree of my “insiderness” and influenced on the decision of those who agreed to give interview, while for those who refused it, it might have looked suspicious that a secular looking student from a Western university approached them in this way. Out of fifteen people contacted online, three refused to participate, two responded that they do not belong to any religious group and one did not respond.

One informant from Sweden contacted me himself after he was forwarded my letter from the HuT Facebook page’s administrator from Kyrgyzstan. He explained that since HuT is banned in Kyrgyzstan but not in Europe, administrators of this page cannot meet with me, but he as a media representative of the head office of the organization and curator of Hizb ut-Tahrir media activities in Central Asia could give an interview via Skype. Thereby, my main group was represented by nine informants recruited online (including respondent from Sweden) and one informant (TJ member) randomly met near the mosque in the Kara-Kol city.

In her master thesis about veiling in Kyrgyzstan, Myrzabekova (2014), a former student of the University of Tromso described her unsuccessful attempts to get access to Imams through her social networks. This influenced my decision to go directly to mosques and try to recruit Imams there. It is common for Muslims in Kyrgyzstan, regardless if they are practicing or secular ones, to go to mosques, where Imams usually perform rather diverse functions that are not merely limited to leading prayers. Typically, they are invited for funerals to read a special prayer, they have an authority to make nikah<sup>56</sup>, people turn to them to make dua<sup>57</sup> for health, from evil eye, bless newborns and for many other purposes. Therefore, I had an impression that they are not somebody unattainable. After visiting five random mosques, I recruited two Imams,

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<sup>54</sup> As-salamu alaykum is a Muslim greeting, which is translated from Arabic as “peace be upon you”. It is a common greeting between men in Kyrgyzstan regardless if they are religious or not. Among women, usually those who practice religion use it. My letters were headed with this greeting to show my respect to the religion of other person.

<sup>55</sup> Hadith is a saying of Muhammad or a report about actions he took. From Arabic translates as report or narrative.

<sup>56</sup> Nikah is Islamic religious marriage.

<sup>57</sup> Dua is an act of supplication in Islam.

while the others were not on place. Whether it was related to the period of Ramadan, when Muslims should try to be more peaceful, helpful, avoid impure thoughts and bad behavior, or all Imams are duty-bound to be open for communication, but I got a surprisingly warm welcome from both of Imams and even spent half a day in the house of one of them.

Other respondents from the second group were recruited by various methods. One religious scholar was randomly met during an event on the release of the first Islamic magazine in Kyrgyzstan. An expert on TJ was met during the above-mentioned summer school and another expert on religious issues was contacted through Facebook. Among my social network, I got a consent for interview from a person who works in the sphere of security services. The official from the State Commission for Religious Affairs was reached directly via a phone call to his office.

### **3.2.4 Anonymity of informants**

Since narratives of the informants are in the central focus of this study, there was a need to present informants' background information, understand their life conditions and experiences. At the same time, however, ethical issues concerning informants' privacy and security had been one of the major concerns, despite the need for the contextualization of the data.

According to Conklin (2015), "religion remains a sensitive topic that must be discussed with consciousness and sensitivity".<sup>58</sup> Moreover, in the light of the the current tense situation in relation to the non-traditional Muslims existing in the society, the security aspect of the research should not be disregarded. Therefore, it was important to observe the issues of privacy and security in order not to put in danger or in troublesome situations any of the informants in the present study.

Although many informants from the main group were not against disclosing their personal data, arguing that they have nothing to hide from the public, I however, inclined to anonymization of the data due to the above-mentioned issues of the sensitivity of the topic and cautious attitudes present in the society. Thereby, all the interviewees from the main group were assured confidentiality and anonymity, except for HuT member from Sweden. In order to guarantee anonymity I named informants with fictive names. Respondents from the second group being public figures agreed to state their personal data openly, except of the informant from security services.

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<sup>58</sup> <http://theodysseyonline.com/emerson/interview-catholic-priest/254507>



### **3.3 Data collection method**

Qualitative research provides “detailed description and analysis of the quality, or the substance, of the human experience” (Marvasti, 2004, p. 7). To understand the complex phenomenon of religion as a set of private beliefs, it was necessary to consider “insiders” lived experiences, realities and practices. Since the purpose was to explore ideologies and the relation to violence among members of Islamic movements in Kyrgyzstan, the qualitative approach was chosen as the most appropriate. The field of Critical Terrorism Studies argues that experts from the anti-terrorism and counter-insurgency structures who seldom study individual perspectives of potential or actual “religious terrorists”, have created a contemporary top down approach to the knowledge about the connections between religion, violence and religious radicalization (.....). This was another motivation to listen to the voices that are usually not heard.

#### **3.3.1 Qualitative interview as a method of data collection**

According to Bremborg (2011), “within religious studies the qualitative interview is a very useful method, since people’s beliefs are diverse and multifaceted, aspects that can be hard to catch in quantitative studies. The method starts with people’s experiences in the world and seeks to get to the bottom of them” (p.310). McGuire (2008) in her book “Lived Religion” writes that often researchers try to measure religiosity based on how well person fits in to the official religious standards like frequency of church attendance, religious texts reading and prayers. However, her experience of studying religion demonstrates that people’s religion was much more complicated than she assumed. Based on complex and nuanced material collected during qualitative interviews and observations, McGuire encourages to study religion as it is actually lived and experienced in the everyday life of people.

Realizing the complexities of individuals’ religious practices, experiences, and expressions, however, has made me extremely doubtful that even mountains of quantitative sociological data (especially data from surveys and other relatively superficial modes of inquiring) can tell us much of any value about individuals’ religions (McGuire, 2008, p. 5).

As I intended to see the world “through the eye” of religious people in my study, the method of qualitative interview was opted as the most relevant one. Interviews were carried out in semi-structured form, where the researcher is guided by a list of questions, but where there is flexibility in how and when the questions are given (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Also, based on the answers of the informant, the researcher may raise extra questions within the frames of

the aims set. Mason (2002) writes that semi-structured interviews give the opportunity not only to build an informative dialogue between interviewer and interviewee but also to learn certain aspects of themselves. I regard that on the one side fairly open and flexible framework of this method allowed an effective conversational communication, while on the other side, it enabled me to have a more thorough self-reflection about my own role as well.

The orientation of the main research questions facilitated the development of interview guidelines. Due to the specific research aim and the religious membership of informants, let alone the characters of each individual, in the process of interview many clarifying and directional questions arose to both main and second group.

### **3.3.2 Conducting interviews**

All informants were interviewed once. The interviews ranged from half an hour to four hours. Generally, interviews with the main group took longer time than with the members of the second group. The places for conducting interviews were discussed with participants, except the cases of purposeful visits to mosques. One target group informant, although he lived in Bishkek preferred to speak through Skype<sup>59</sup>, another one lived in Sweden and was interviewed online as well. Two interviews with main group members took place in halal cafes, two in coffee houses, two in the park, one in the work place of one of the respondents. The one informant whom I met randomly in the Kara-Kol city gave interview on place. All interviews with the second group members were carried out in the work places of respondents, except one, that took place in the house of Imam<sup>60</sup>. All interviews were recorded on tape and later transcribed.

Generally, most of the respondents during interviews were open and willing to share their opinions. Two main informants expressed an interest in the results of my project and asked me to send them a copy of the thesis after its completion. Several informants underlined the actuality of the topic, however for them any project about Islamization and religious groups seemed useless as there is only one government's position. In their view, the government would never recognize the peaceful nature of religious movements since it considers them as a potential threat to its position; therefore, they were skeptical about academic study of this topic since it would not change the status quo.

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<sup>59</sup> My assumption on this reason is presented in the "cross gender interviewing" section.

<sup>60</sup> When I visited a mosque in Kara-Kol city I found it empty and people outside suggested me to go to the house of Imam which was behind the mosque.

### **3.4 Self-reflection in relation to Insider and Outsider positions**

The qualitative nature of research implies immersion in to the environment of the studied phenomena. In this regard, the role of researcher moves to the foreground, as he acts as a “primary instrument” of data collection, selection and procession of gathered information, which in turn are substantially influenced by the researcher’s own experience, knowledge, biases and other factors innate to human nature (Merriam, 2002, p. 5). Such role of the researcher cannot but raise a question about the reliability of the data. According to Lewis (2009), the development of the concept of reliability in the history of social sciences has undergone important changes. In the traditional era that dominated in the last century researchers were expected to have a high criteria for reliability of the data, mirroring those in quantitative studies, when the data from research considered reliable if it could be replicated (ibid). While qualitative researchers in the modern time (21<sup>st</sup> century) tend to avoid restricting their study to rigid standards and emphasize more on challenges and opportunities they faced, by employing a strategy of reflexivity, preferably at all stages of research (ibid).

Reflexivity as defined by Berger (2013) “is a process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher’s positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome” (p. 2). It has been recognized as an important strategy in the process of knowledge construction, as researcher’s ability to consciously and often critically reflect upon own role, may enhance transparency and reliability of his work and minimize biases (Berger, 2013; Finlay, 2002; Pillow, 2003). On the other hand, in disclosing the self and being introspective, there is a danger that “the researcher’s voice may eventually overshadow the participant’s” or shift attention from the phenomenon being studied (Finlay, 2002, p. 225). In this regard, the researcher is accountable for the degree and depth of self-reflection and has to be aware of the possible dangers this may entail (Finlay, 2002).

Bearing in mind the importance of self-reflection and the dangers of falling into extremes of introspection or too superficial approach to self, I would like to continue with the discussion of my role/position as an insider and outsider during the research process. Who is an insider in qualitative studies? The researcher becomes an insider if he shares “similar cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national heritage” with the participants (Ganga & Scott, 2006). From this perspective, the fact that I come from same country, speak the same language and have a common cultural and traditional background with the Kyrgyz participants, assigned me an insider status. Kanuha (2000) regards as insiders those social scientists who study their own

communities or social identity groups. In her study of marginalized groups, she was an insider as she came from the same group herself, meaning that she had ideological affiliation and deep knowledge about the group. In my case, my position was not that obvious, I am a Muslim familiar with basic Islamic knowledge and sharing religious values, which made me an insider in relation to the larger Muslim community, but at the same time, I was not a member of the particular religious groups that I was interested in. As for the outsider, Chavez (2008) identifies as such one who is unfamiliar with the setting or does not share commonalities with the studied group. Here, my gender in relation to eight male respondents from the target group, ethnicity in relation to three non-Kyrgyz participants and, as noted above, non-membership in particular religious groups situated me on the place of outsider.

Critical awareness of one's own position as insider/outsider is an integral part of an effective collaborative process with members of studied groups, and in relation to my study, I periodically had to ask myself, how my position as an insider in some aspects and as an outsider in others influenced my ability to understand religious people and interpret the collected data. As somehow I shared both statuses, it was important to be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of being an insider/outsider, respectively.

Generally, experts distinguish as an advantage of being insider the ability to get closer to the studied object, and the more the insider researcher shares multiple identities (e.g., has similar ethnicity, gender or other identities) the closer he may get (Kanuha, 2000; Rabe, 2003; Chavez, 2008). Kanuha (2000) explains closeness from the point of "intimate knowledge" (p. 439) that the insider researcher possesses about the community, while for Rabe (2003) it is "intuitive ... understanding" (p. 149) that brings an insider closer in discovering the other, and for Chavez it is "unique insights" (p. 476) that researcher may have due to the insider position. In addition, the matters of accessibility to and acceptance by the group are important during a qualitative study. An insider researcher can have easier and faster access based on the common identities he shares with participants, and be accepted due to a higher level of trust and openness (Breen, 2007). Besides, the insider status can become crucial if one is trying to get access to groups that, as in my case, operate clandestine or are generally not welcome in society. Scholars from field of religious studies acknowledge the above-mentioned advantages as well, albeit not without some specifications. In the field of religious studies, the matter of the researcher's own religion is under special attention. The researcher may share all sorts of characteristic with the participants, but once he lacks such important component like belief in the deity, his position and values become somehow less significant (MacIntyre, 1964 cited in McCutcheon, 1999). For example, in the case of a sceptic or non-believer on the one side and a religious person on

the other, both engage in the communication with sets of assumptions so different that they are in fact not comparable (ibid). For MacIntyre (1964), the insider/outsider problem in the study of religion is obvious as “outsiders cannot hope to understand insiders and (vice versa)” (cited in McCutcheon p.21). Smith (1973) holds an unequivocal position in favor of insider research and claims that “no statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion's believers” (Smith, 1973, cited in Reat, 1983, p.460). According to this logic, only an insider-believer can have stronger position when it comes to the interpretation of other person’s spiritual world and values. To illustrate the importance of insider role in the study of religion, Smith builds an analogy with language. A foreigner is unlikely to understand unfamiliar language without an interpreter; the same goes for religion, where insiders are capable to interpret the sacred values and complexity of the inner world of religious people to outsiders (Smith, 1973 cited in Reat, 1983, p.461). Though not that categorical, Engelke (2002) argues that it is better to have a background as a believer, even if the researcher’s religion differs from the studied, than to be an atheist.

Nevertheless, an insider position/role has own downsides. Kanuha (2000) argues that insider status certainly enhances the ability of better understanding peculiarities of the studied group that may go unnoticed by an outsider, however this may evoke the questions of “objectivity, reflexivity and authenticity”, as a researcher perhaps “knows too much or is too close” and “may be too similar to those being studied” (p. 444). In this situation, advantages of closeness to participants can easily turn into disadvantages. When an insider is in the position of “knowing too much”, he may take for granted certain aspects of the participant’s life, experience and actions and oversee meaningful data that would be valuable for an outsider. In this regard, an insider researcher should gather data with “eyes open”, and assume that he knows very little about the studied phenomenon (Asselin, 2003, cited in Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 55). How the researcher is perceived in the group can have limitations as well, assuming that the insider already knows the answer, participants may omit or disregard important data (Breen, 2007; Ganga & Scott, 2006; Chavez, 2008).

It could be said briefly that the disadvantages of an insider position are usually the advantages of an outsider. However, some interesting arguments about benefits of outsider position have been discussed by Tinker and Armstrong (2008). According to the authors, the position of outsider, when the researcher a priori knows little about the studied topic or people, can contribute to objectivity of opinion. In this position both researcher and respondents are able to see clearer differences in knowledge and experiences between each other, which gives opportunities to the outsider researcher to ask more nuanced questions and receive more

profound and in-depth accounts in return. Cultural ignorance can turn into a positive strategy as well, when an outsider rather than trying to demonstrate his knowledge can benefit from “empowering the interviewee by putting him/her in the position of authority about the topic in question” (Tinker & Armstrong, 2008, p. 56). Fay (1996) notes that by placing themselves on a valuable distance, outsiders might be able to see the wider perspective of the studied topic; see those connections and relations, which might not be seen through an insider’s internal experience (Fay, 1996, cited in Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p.57). Besides, when it comes to the discussions of sensitive topics like somebody’s religion, participants may feel more free and comfortable with an outsider who is perhaps less likely to make judgmental assumptions (Tinker & Armstrong, 2008).

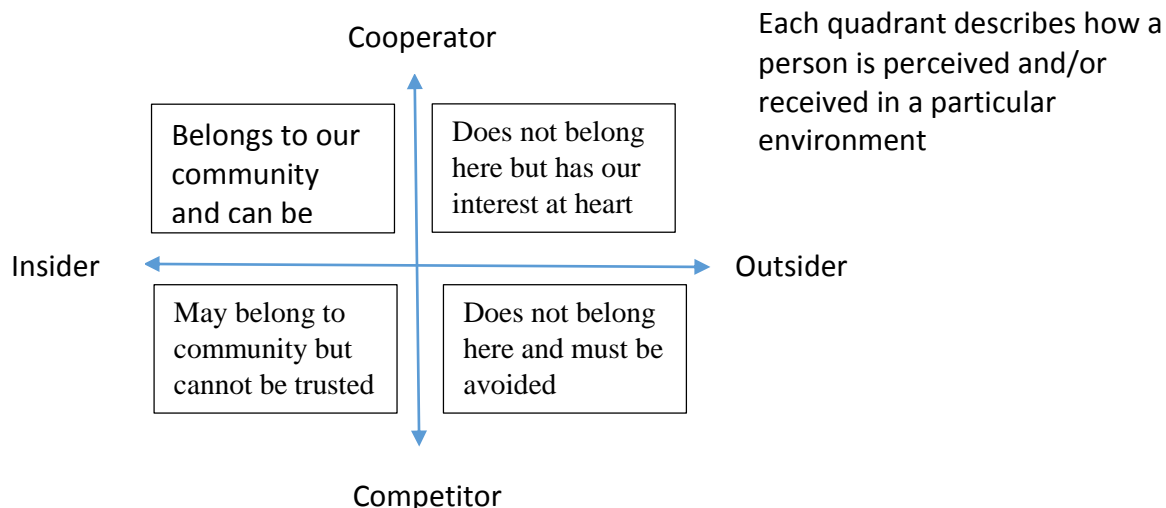
As the above-mentioned arguments demonstrate, there are strengths and limitations of both insider and outsider positions and a researcher may find himself in predicament when choosing between them, if choosing is at all possible. However, many researchers seem to agree that such a dilemma does not exist; Harvey (2011) among them, mentions that there are “no insiders who are not sometimes ‘outside’ to some degree in relation to those they observe” (p. 227). Tinker and Armstrong (2008) argue that the researcher always has commonalities with and differences from the studied subject in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, culture and personality to name but a few. Here, similarity in one of these characteristics does not necessarily make one an insider, just as a difference does not always make one an outsider. In this regard, it is likely that researchers “oscillate between these positions as they move in and out of similarity and difference” (Tinker & Armstrong, 2008, p. 54). Given the flexible nature of these positions, Tinker and Armstrong (2008) consider it infeasible for the researcher to choose only one of the positions. In the interest of the more reliable results, Breen (2007) suggests to maintain a partnership between both insider and outsider roles, as this “would balance the advantages of both positions while minimizing the disadvantages of each” (Breen 2007, p. 164). Based on the dualistic nature of my own position I cannot but agree with the above-mentioned point that one can hardly claim to be a total insider or a complete stranger (outsider) towards the studied topic.

Understanding various aspects of insider/outsider research, especially when your position is not straightforward, is crucial during qualitative data collection. I was both insider and outsider, while from the perspective of religious studies, I was more insider as I possess the grain of faith within myself. This provided more than enough reasons for choosing a strategy of careful self-reflection through all stages of research. The strategy of reflexivity enabled me to ask not only myself but also to ask about the respondents’ perception of my role, so that I

could be more aware of the benefits and limitations of the particular position I held and could sometimes mediate conflicting duality of my insider/outsider positions in a search for effective balance.

### **3.4.1 My role as a researcher**

The matters of getting access into a sensitive area like somebody's religious life and getting acceptance by religious people, especially if they are members of marginalized "radical" groups or religious authorities like Imams, may highly depend on the position of the researcher. On the one hand, I was part of the culture, I knew traditions of the country, I spoke same language, and I had common religious values with the respondents. On the other hand, I was not a member of the chosen groups and I was not of the same gender as most of my informants. However, the initial fear that my non-membership would hinder acceptance decreased once the informants became more aware of my personality. While contacting potential respondents online and during random meetings, I demonstrated my "insiderness" by openly talking about my personal interest in Islam and religious practices and at the same time revealed my "outsiderness" by informing that I study at a foreign university in Europe and I am trying to do impartial research on the topic of religion and violence. By presenting myself in some way religious, I felt that I was acting honestly towards the respondents in disclosing myself, the same time, I expected to advantage from this position to get faster access to the field, as the research period was limited, and to get deeper acceptance by the group members due to the specific nature of the research topic. Most of my respondents expressed the opinion that they feel more relaxed speaking with a Muslim researcher. They also expressed confidence that being religious myself, I would be able to understand the situation better than an outsider and to interpret the information correctly. It can be assumed, that my religious identity generally facilitated acceptance. If we use Jacob Loewen's insider-outsider model (adapted by Kaufmann, 2013) in the study of religious communities, my position can be found oscillating between the quadrants above the horizontal axis.



At the same time, I could not escape the challenge of “knowing too much” and “being too close”. Because “no research is free of the biases, assumptions, and personality of the researcher” (Sword, 1999 cited in Berger, 2013 p. 11), it was obvious for me that the degree of my personal familiarity sometimes put me in a danger of bringing my own experience and knowledge into the data collection and analysis. Semi-structured interviewing gives a certain flexibility and opportunity to navigate the interview process; in this situation, I often had to ask myself if my point of view dominated or guided the way the dialogue was constructed or if I still managed to uphold a position of objectivity. At times, strong internal disagreement with what had been told or, on the contrary, too close emotional empathy towards the narrative of respondents, prevented me from focusing on the interview process. In such moments, the need to keep a reasonable distance both intellectually and emotively from what had been told as well as the need to separate personal experience from those of participants, appeared to be a main challenge and foremost task.

### 3.4.2 Language

“Language is a fundamental tool through which qualitative researchers seek to understand human behavior, social processes and the cultural meanings that inscribe human behavior” (Hennink, 2008, p. 21). Sharing the language of participants enabled me to have a direct communication and avoid problems associated with translation. In this sense, my fluent Russian and those of my respondents did not breed grave misunderstandings. However, the context of the chosen topic of study and the religious background of selected respondents implied not an ordinary communication. Religious ideas are represented in language and like any other language have their own vocabulary and specific terminology. Certainly, the basic terminology



of Islam mainly formed on the basis of the Quran and hadiths of the Prophet, which was not unfamiliar for me, and ability to comprehend nuances of sacred language perhaps put me in a more privileged position than an outsider would achieve. According to Jafari (2011), “the language of religion is comprised of a set of symbols, myths, metaphors and esoteric signs” (p.115). During the dialogue with religious persons, it was important to interpret such language correctly and later transform it into the academic format. This required switching between insider and outsider positions, especially in cases when shared knowledge about the same religious narratives did not imply the same interpretation. Often participants, by saying “As you know that story” or “as a Muslim you understand this”, assumed that I have a similar understanding and did not find it necessary to discuss further the story they mentioned. To diminish the danger of misinterpretation, I often occupied the position of outsider by asking participants to elaborate more on the narrative and their point of view. The language of one informant was rather unique; it represented a mixture of prison jargon where he spent many years and religious expressions.

### **3.4.3 Cross-gender interviewing**

A predominant perception of Islam is that it is a male dominant religion and the role of women is largely limited to one of submission. However, women’s place is not that unambiguous as commonly assumed. There are several interpretations of such a position that range from conservative versions that mainly proclaims male superiority and dominance, to reformist that supports the idea of gender equality in Islam. Obviously, such approaches also include opinions on opposite gender interactions. In the most conservative version, any social interactions between non-married men and women is prohibited, while reformists disagree with gender segregation and believe it contradicts the true meaning of the Quran that advocates an equal status for both genders.

Although, it was anticipated that a majority of respondent would be males due to their activeness in online social networks, the aim, however, was not to target exclusively this gender. Yet, among three women contacted online, I received one agreement from a “woman” who appeared to be a male due to my confusion with “her” name as it is usually, with rare exceptions, associated with a woman’s name in Kyrgyzstan. Since the refusals of others were not backed with explanations, I am not sure if my gender or other factors determined their decision. After the fieldwork finished, I felt discontent that could not listen to women’s voices and this made me turn to online social network again to target only women informants. Finally, I received agreements from two women and interviewed them when I visited Kyrgyzstan in

winter 2015. One of them explained the possible hesitance of other Muslim women: “We bear all societal pressure for wearing hijab [...] they<sup>61</sup> imprison women with children, it is likely that women do not want to risk. Also, they need their husband’s permission”.

Due to the initial determination to interview members of groups that are largely perceived as “radicals”, I expected that my gender would affect the decision of male respondents. On the contrary, male respondents contacted online and met during random meetings, wished to participate in interviews and by talking rather openly about sensitive matters dispelled my initial doubts that my gender might hinder the process. Yet, I could see that my gender put several respondents in a paradoxical situation. They sounded as if they were trying to find an excuse for the situation that they, as males, were talking with an opposite gender. It was demonstrated by their reflecting on the situation, when on the one hand, religion prohibits them to stay alone with a woman<sup>62</sup>, and on the other hand, religion encourages every Muslim to help those seeking a knowledge<sup>63</sup>. Another interesting observation appeared when one Salafi respondent was asked if he could introduce me to other members of the movement. He unequivocally, refused responding that he does not want to compromise himself before other members by disclosing the fact of having had a conversation with a woman. Besides, two interviews were carried out through skype. In both cases, the interview was conducted blindly, as the respondents asked to turn off the video mode. Here, my gender was an obvious reason rather than the matter of anonymity, as persons could be easily detected online.

During my observation of a Salafi religious lecture organized for women, I did not expect that my “outsiderness” would be noted since I did not have to speak there and was wearing Islamic cloth. However, my bright scarf and skirt sharply contrasted with women sitting in black from head to toe and attracted different gazes from curious to critical. In this situation, it was obvious that I am an outsider to this group although I looked religious and was of same gender.

### **3.5 Summary**

The main methodological issues of the research were covered briefly at the beginning. A prime focus was on the strength and limitations of insider and outsider roles of researchers in general and about my roles in particular. Meanwhile, scholars do not express unambiguous opinion in

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<sup>61</sup> means Government and security services

<sup>62</sup> Respondents referred to several verses from the Quran that call men to lower gazes when they see woman. It is done to protect sight from temptation.

<sup>63</sup> Respondents mentioned importance of knowledge and the call to assist the seeker of knowledge indicated both in the Quran and in hadiths.

favor of a particular position, as advantages of one position are often limitations of another and vice versa.

My data collection experience showed that my personal characteristics, like my religion, gender and language influenced the process of data collection and analysis and also in relation to the respondents I was both an insider and an outsider. Awareness about my own roles/positions was considered to be important, during the process of self-reflection. By using self-reflection I could better understand how the status of being religious, the ability to speak the same language and to have a different gender may be both advantageous and have their own limitations.

## Chapter 4. Conceptual framework

*The conceptual framework is a formulation of what you think is going on with the phenomena you are studying – a tentative theory of what is happening and why.*  
(Maxwell, 2009, p. 222)

This chapter presents a conceptual framework for the study of the connection between religion and violence in the ideologies of the members of TJ, Salafi and HuT. According to Rubin & Rubin (2005), “[m]ore important than borrowing concepts and themes from the literature is finding those that emerge from the interviews” (p. 210). It was supposed that pre-set conceptual framework would be improper in exploring such phenomenon like religion and complexity of person’s worldviews, therefore the study allowed the data from the field guide the choice of relevant concepts.

The relationship between religion and violence has long been a topic of historical interest while particular concern about the connection of Islam and violence has been largely developed since tragic events of 9/11. It has become a common issue that if religious movements make the news, it is because of some cases of violence. In the case of Islam, jihad has been highly associated with violence. Therefore, from the beginning of the project, it has been clear that the notion of jihad would occupy a central place in discussions with the informants and would be conceptualized in this chapter. It is important to mention that movements do not invent own concepts related to violence, but an explanation of violence is generally based on their interpretations of jihad. The scholarship on the concept of jihad is mainly divided into those who support the idea that an armed action is central to jihad and those who accent a non-militant character of jihad. Giving an overview of the both characteristics of jihad as they help to highlight informants’ reflections, the chapter further focuses on the concepts of peace and peacebuilding in Islam and religious fundamentalism that complement the concept of jihad and help to understand the relations of informants to people and world around and to “measure” the danger that movements represent.

The contribution of Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) to the study of the phenomenon of religious violence will be highlighted in this chapter as well, as CTS, by using critical approach to the traditional studies on the concept of religious violence, developed own analytical framework to understand the concept of religion and to see how “religious” is actually the religious violence.

## 4.1 Jihad

Commonly referred in English as a “Holy War”, the literal translation of jihad from Arabic is “to strive”, “to exert” and “to fight”; however, exact meaning depends on the context.<sup>64</sup> The importance of jihad is based on the verses from the Quran that call to struggle on the way of God and on the examples of the life of the Prophet Muhammad and of his early companions (Bello, 2013; Moniruzzaman, 2008; Cook, 2005). Jihad is a complex set of meanings, which, in a broad sense implies spiritual and armed struggle (ibid). Such controversial characteristic of jihad rises many disputes in academia and among religious scholars over its true nature. Esposito (2002) a prominent expert on Islam writes: “Jihad is a concept with multiple meanings, used and abused throughout Islamic history” (p. 27).

### 4.1.1 Jihad as a warfare

Scholars usually distinguish classical and modern approaches to jihad as warfare. The classical concept of jihad based on the Quran and Sunnah<sup>65</sup> is about the warfare against the enemies of the Muslim community, and early Islamic theologians<sup>66</sup> advocated offensive and defensive jihad (Knapp, 2003). They considered offensive jihad in the context of the confrontation between Dar Al Islam (the lands under the control of Islam) and Dar Al Harb (territory of war, which lands were not under the rule of Muslims). Since Dar Al Harb was mainly inhabited by “people of the Book”<sup>67</sup> and polytheists, offensive jihad was necessary and had to be continued until all non-Muslim territories would be under the rule of Dar Al Islam. However, it did not imply a constant warfare but the short-term peace treaties and negotiations of truces were also an option. Jackson (2002) writes that the classical concept of offensive jihad is strictly regulated by the Islamic law that sees wars as a sometimes necessary evil on the way of building justice in the world and expansion of Islamic rule in the world was not necessarily limited to warfare only. According to Bassiouni (2007), a defensive character of jihad is based on the verse of the Quran (2:191) that says: “Fight in the way of God against those who fight against you, but do not begin hostilities for God does not love aggression” (p.130). This verse was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad when polytheists in Mecca persecuted him and his commune, therefore, a defensive war was permitted only after all efforts of the Prophet Muhammad to keep peace

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<sup>64</sup><http://www.oxfordreference.com/search?btog=chap&q0=jihad&source=%2F10.1093%2Fafref%2F9780195125580.001.0001%2Fafref-9780195125580>

<sup>65</sup> Sunnah is the verbally transmitted record of the teachings, deeds and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad as well as various records about his companions (<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2011/03/22/3170810.htm>). Sunnah is a broader term as it refers to the hadith as well as to narratives that describe how the Prophet and his companions acted in different situations and contexts (ibid).

<sup>66</sup> Those who lived during the first three centuries of Islam

<sup>67</sup> Jews and Christians

failed and Muslim community was attacked. Bello (2013) argues that the modern perception of jihad as a Holy war is erroneous since this notion implies something supernatural and unreasoned, while jihad, on the contrary is logical, reasoned and based on a just cause. To be a just war, both offensive and defensive jihad had to follow certain Islamic rulings (Cook, 2005). It had to be authorized by the leader of the Muslim community for the sake of a matter that is universally admitted to be of crucial importance for the community against the enemy of Islam. Further, jihad, its causes, terms of resolutions before the start of the violence, had to be formally announced to the enemy. In addition, regulations forbade violence towards non-combatants, destruction of their property and non-respect towards the enemy dead. If unjust attacks were done by Muslims they were not regarded as jihad in the Islamic law.

Understanding of the modern concept of jihad requires a historical context. Cook (2005) writes that with the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1924, which was the last Islamic Caliphate, there was no more Islamic authority to declare jihad in the Muslim world. By the same period, most of the Muslim territories were either colonized or indirectly (through proxies) ruled by European powers and this appeared to be a major shock for Muslims. Islam authorized that Muslims would be in a domineering position in the world so as to proclaim the truth. However, by the beginning of the twentieth century, most Muslims were neither ruling nor dominating on their own territories not to mention the whole world. Foreigners, local non-Muslims who were not allowed to rise above certain level now were actively engaging and determining politics in the Muslim countries. All of these changes facilitated redefinition of the classical concept of jihad and throughout 20<sup>th</sup> century different representatives of the Islamic community, like religious scholars or rigid jihadist like Usama Ben Laden, developed new paradigms of the concept. These paradigms, Cook (2005) argues, had been behind the rise of many modern radical movements. New radical Islamic movements from Palestine to Xinjiang propagated new versions of jihad based on the situation in their country. The classical concept has been reconsidered to be a war for justice against oppression, colonization, corruption of governments, occupation and westernization. The legitimacy of the use of violence ranged from the local struggle against the oppressive ruler to the global war against all infidels. If jihad in the classical approach was not mandatory for all Muslims, as long as other Muslims were ready to carry the burden of warfare, then the modern concepts argued it to be an obligation for all Muslims. However based on the example of the prominent Palestinian radical jihadist Abdul Azzam, Cook (2005) argues that there was jihad solely based on religious motive as well, as Azzam fought for the sake of Islam rather than the sake of Palestinian freedom. His teachings were particularly successful in activating the jihadists from all over the world to fight against

the Soviet Union in Afghanistan<sup>68</sup>. Cook (2005) writes that it was for the first time in centuries when Muslims from all over the world came together, irrespective of their ethnicities, even differences in Islamic doctrines, to fight primarily for the sake of Islam. Azzam stressed that only Jihad would resurrect the Muslim world and re-create the true Muslim society similar to the times of the Prophet Muhammad. Perhaps no other Muslim prior to Azzam had been so explicit in defining the most extreme version of Jihad in the modern context:

History does not write its lines except with blood. Glory does not build its lofty edifices except with skull. Honor and respect cannot be established except on a foundation of cripples and corpses. Empires, distinguished peoples, states, and societies cannot be established except with examples. Indeed, those who think that they can change reality or change societies without blood, sacrifices, and invalids—without pure innocent souls—do not understand the essence of this din [Islam] and they do not know the method of the best of Messengers [Muhammad] (Azzam, cited in Cook., 2005, p. 129).

Al-Qaeda, ISIS and some other violent Islamic groups can be distinguished by sharing similar positions towards warfare as jihad. However, Streusand (1997) argues that there is no universal enthusiasm among Muslims since such ideas of jihad could not mobilize Pan-Islamic resistance to colonialism and other forms of oppressions. With regards to interpretation of sacred texts especially ones like the Quran that contains a lot of so-called “sword” (violent) verses, Armstrong<sup>69</sup> (2005) writes that their literal understanding may lead to distortion of the real meaning and tearing of verses out of the context for the sake of justification of violent jihad only exacerbate misunderstandings.

#### **4.1.2 Jihad as a non-warfare**

Acknowledging militant characteristic of jihad within the frames of the classical concept, predominantly Islamic scholarship holds an opinion that another side of jihad that calls for an internal struggle with self is more important (Esposito, 2002). Like a concept of jihad as warfare, non-violent jihad refers to the verses in the Quran and example of the Prophet Muhammad’s life. The famous hadith reflecting the non-violent character of Jihad and often cited by Muslims and scholars says that when the Prophet Muhammad and his companions returned from the battlefield, he said that they returned from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad (Esposito, 2002). When asked what a greater jihad is his response was that it is a struggle against self and inner evil. The greater jihad is an inner war against the harmful instincts and resistance

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<sup>68</sup> Soviet Afghan war 1979-1989

<sup>69</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/aug/11/terrorism.politicsphilosophyandsociety>

to the temptations of the body and the world that corrupt the soul. It is inner purification of own soul and correction of intentions that should be in the first place for Muslims before going to the outward war with enemies. El Fadl (2003) writes that “cleansing oneself from vanity and pettiness, pursuing knowledge, curing the ill, feeding the poor, and standing up for truth and justice even at great personal risk are all forms of jihad” (p. 37). Therefore, jihad is not about a warfare but the person’s welfare and struggle for justice. However, he stresses that no matter how humanistic and moral the concept of jihad is, it will be useless if not believed and practiced by modern Muslims. The greater jihad is much more difficult than lesser, but if a person succeeds in struggle with own selfishness and masters own ego than the path to inner and outer peace regardless if he is poor or rich, sick or healthy, has power or not will be much easier and he will be rewarded in afterlife (Rashid, 2003). In this moment a person stops blaming others as sees own mistakes, repents and finds refuge in patience. Moniruzzaman (2008) writes: “Jihad can be understood from a universal humane perspective and its philosophical, moral principles can be used in greater human and social welfare” (p. 1). Jihad emphasizes the importance of dawah; a non-violent means that helps to propagate knowledge about Islamic principles of justice and morality (Rashid, 2003).

## **4.2 The concepts of peace and peacebuilding in Islam**

The concept of jihad as a non-warfare is often considered as an integral part of the broader concept of peace in Islam. Abu-Nimer (2001) writes that the concept of peace is an essence of Islam and it propagates such values like “social justice, brotherhood, equality of mankind (including the abolishment of slavery, and racial and ethnic barriers), tolerance, submission to God, and the recognition of the rights of others” (p.233). The will to live in harmony and peace with others is inherent to human nature and sustaining harmony is an ultimate responsibility of a man who is according to Islam is a vicegerent of God on the planet (ibid). Therefore, the concept of peace in Islam is not a mere absence of war but it is actions to eliminate grounds for conflict. Here, peace and peacebuilding become complementary. He discusses a set of values and principles that constitute an Islamic peacebuilding framework. The principle of *justice* is important because in Islam actions for the cause of God is synonymous with pursuing justice. Several Quranic verses have a strong message to work for justice and oppose oppression on personal and structural levels. Peace is a product of justice, therefore Muslims and Muslim rulers should consider it their duty to seek and apply justice, by means of non-violent activism. Following the requirement of Islam like making zakyat (almsgiving) which is the fifth pillar of



Islam and doing voluntary donations help to distribute wealth more evenly and contribute to economic justice. Another requirement is doing good, which is associated with all the virtue of the Prophet. Doing good for parents, neighbors, orphans, needy and helpless helps to build social justice and if observed together with the economic justice it is a foundation for the non-violent building of just society. *Universal humanity* is another central virtue in Islam. The human is God's crown of creation who has a potential to learn, choose how to act and bear responsibility for his actions. Thus, the respect of human life and human dignity is sacred in religion. *Equality* is acknowledged to be a basic value because of the common origin of all humans. Islam does not support ethnical or racial differences and the only difference among Muslims is based on their devotion to Allah. Because all people have common origin, the desire to be above others brings injustice and disorder. The Quran (5:32, 17:33) clearly suggests the sacredness of human life: "And if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people", "And do not take a life which Allah has forbidden save in the course of justice. This he enjoins on you so that you may understand"(cited in Abu-Nimer, 2001, p. 242). Besides, the destruction of human's resources is also forbidden, and when Muslims in early years participated in wars, they were instructed by rulers to avoid destruction of assets and killing of non-combatants. The virtue of *sabr* (patience) helps to avoid many problems. Muslims are called to be patient and to wait on their judgement of others. The way Muslims should practice patience is expressed in many verses in the Quran and one of which that says (70:5): "Therefore do you hold patience-a patience of beautiful (contentment)" reflects a deep commitment to God (cited in Abu-Nimer, 2001, p. 252). This commitment is a source of patience that helps to resist worldly hardships, physical and moral problems. In the face of oppression and persecution, patience should not be a passive activity but rather be a complement in the pursuit of social justice by means of praying and "active" patience (enduring oppression for the sake of God). According to the Prophet, patience and self-restraint are better than revenge because "power resides not in being able to strike another, but in being able to keep the self under control when anger arises" (Sahih Al-Bukhari, cited in Abu-Nimer, p. 252).

Wahiduddin Khan writes that the Quran and the hadiths are primary sources of all basic concepts in Islam. Concerning the concept of peace, the Quran that starts with the words "in the name of God the most merciful and beneficent" (p.4) and states that prophets were sent to the world as a mercy to people promotes the culture of mercy but not of war. As for the application of Quranic commands than the deeds and righteous behavior of the Prophet Muhammad and of his early companions are the best examples. In the course of his life, the Prophet participated in three self-defensive wars that did not total more than one and a half

days. Wahiduddin Khan notes that it is necessary to count the historical context of the Prophet's period when the wars and violence were a normal condition of life and coming to preach a oneness of God in the polytheistic community was a great danger in itself. It would be expected to interpret one of the first revelations from God that called for purification of Kaabah from idols as a physical action, however the Prophet opted the way of dawah in spreading the ideas of monotheism and the first thirteen years<sup>70</sup> of his prophecy are marked by the absence of violent confrontations.

In Kyrgyzstan, since the Soviet-Afghan war, the term jihad has been associated with fanaticism and excessive violence while events of 9/11 and the recent rise of ISIS only reinforced such associations. Although this term is seldom used in modern Kyrgyzstan and was not scrutinized by experts within the local context, the highly debated topic of radicalization of Muslims that largely implies the conflict potential of non-traditional Muslims has a direct correlation with violent jihad. Non-traditional Muslims, however, consider jihad as a sixth pillar<sup>71</sup> of the faith and emphasize the importance of the understanding of this concept correctly. Galdini writes that given the sensitivity of the topic of religious violence and its potential in the country people generally left with the official position of the Government that blankly condemns anything that does not conform to the traditional version of Islam.

### **4.3 Fundamentalism**

Fundamentalism is widely used concept in 21 century. Many scholars share an opinion that without secularization and modernization there would be no such phenomenon like fundamentalism (Emerson & Hartman, 2006). Secularization implies that people can live and develop without reliance upon religion and that faith is something that is outdated like a historical artefact. The term fundamentalism was originally used to explain the conservative strain of Protestantism in the United States in early 1900 that opposed to modernization (ibid). In a broader sense, the term denotes an individual or a group that believes in literal meaning of scripture, precise religious practices and the realization that there is a need to go back to the basics of the faith – the “pure religion”,- which has been perverted or lost (Gregg, 2013). Almond, Sivan and Appleby (1995) made extensive studies of the ideologies of religious groups and suggest five ideological characteristics of fundamentalist groups. First is the reactivity to the marginalization of religion; the primary task of fundamentalism is a defense of religious

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<sup>70</sup> The prophetic mission of Muhammad lasted for 23 years.

<sup>71</sup> There are five pillars of faith in Islam, which include belief in one God, fasting, prayer, going for the pilgrimage to Makkah and giving charity

tradition, which is considered to be under attack of modernization and secularization. Second is selectivity; some aspects of religious tradition are singled out and reshaped, particularly that aspects that differentiate fundamentalists from secularists. However, such groups do not reject all aspect of modernity and feel comfortable to use modern technologies and modern forms of communications. In addition, certain effects of modernization process are distinguished for special attention and criticism (such as the topic of abortion for fundamentalists Christian groups). Third is a dualistic worldview, when the present reality is divided into the good and the bad, darkness and lightness, proper and improper behavior. Fourth is absolutism and infallibility; the texts of world religions (Torah, Quran and Bible) are considered to be divinely inspired, thus contain true meaning. Fifth is millennialism and messianism; world religions believe that the history of the world has a holy end and at the end of time the promised savior (the Messiah, the hidden Imam) will come to fight the evil, end suffering of people and bring God's order. Fundamentalism can take violent and non-violent forms.

#### **4.3.1 Violent fundamentalism**

Juergensmeyer (2003), in his work "Terror in the name of God" through studying ideologies of various religious movements and sects, tries to understand "why violence and religion have reemerged so dramatically at this moment in history, and why they have so frequently been found in combination" (p. 121). Based on the results of his studies he argues that confrontation between religion and secularism is framed as a cosmic war in which only one of the sides will win. It is a cosmic war between good and right against bad and wrong and the final aim of the fundamentalists is to reestablish religion to its place at the core of public consciousness. Religion is stepping into the public realm, rejecting the usual private sphere and entrance into the public life means challenging the secular order. In such situation, violence can be employed to make fundamentalists' position and presence known:

What makes religious violence particularly savage and relentless is that its perpetrators have placed such religious images of divine struggle – cosmic war – in the service of worldly political battles. For this reason, acts of religious terror serve not only as tactics in a political struggle, but also as evocations of a much larger spiritual confrontation (Juergensmeyer, 2003, pp.149-150).

For Hoffman (2006) religious terrorism as a form of violent fundamentalism produces "radically different value systems, mechanisms of legitimation and justification, concepts of morality and, worldviews"; as a consequence, religious terrorism "represents a very different

and possibly far more lethal threat than that posed by more familiar, traditional terrorist adversaries” (pp. 88, 272 cited in Gunning & Jackson, 2011, p. 372 ).

Fundamentalists may turn to violence if they feel that there are no enough political avenues to promote changes in the society, if they feel betrayed by their political leaders, if movements feel threatened by society or government, finally, violence can be a tool to find out who is devoted to the group’s ideas and who is not (for example, killing of apostate Muslims) (Gregg, 2013). Unlike the apocalyptic war described above this form of violent fundamentalism is reactive rather than proactive and depending on the situation they may change their strategies (ibid). For example, an anti-abortion movement in the US, mainly driven by religious people has gone through the periods of violent and non-violent actions. In the 1980s, the movement based on the paradoxical interpretation of the commandment “thou shall not kill” believed that violence was needed to stop abortions. The movement carried a number of clinic bombings and assassinations of doctors. When such actions began to turn supports away the movement returned to the non-violent political resistance as a method of actions. With regard to HuT Karagiannis and Mccauley (2006) note that the real position of the movement on the question of allowed methods of resistance is not so clear-cut. On the one side HuT has been following the non-violent methods of political struggle since the day of appearance, however on the other side, it is possible that it is only waiting for a right moment to launch all possible methods in the struggle for own aims.

#### **4.3.2 Non-violent fundamentalism**

Fundamentalism like radicalization can be a process when individuals adopt ideological messages and belief system that can promote a shift from moderate beliefs to extreme actions (Bartlett & Miller, 2012). However, to be a fundamentalist is to disclaim the status quo but not necessarily through violent means (ibid). Emerson and Hartman (2006) write that as a reaction to the changes around fundamentalists may choose different actions. The most common is isolating themselves from others. This action can include physical isolation of the individual or a group by creating separate communes, splitting off from the mainstream religion and having own groups, or social isolation by creating own parallel organizations like schools, clinics, shops, etc. Fundamentalists can also distance themselves from others by wearing special clothing like Muslims attributes. Another method is active participation in social and political life in order to change the policies. Activities may include participation in elections, demonstrations and other non-violent means. Galtung (2016) regards it necessary to make a clear distinction between fundamentalism and extremism, as the former has to do with inner

faith while the latter is based on outer violence against others. Although fundamentalist's belief may go much deeper than others have, yet it seldom crosses the border to violence. For him, it is not evident that fundamentalists are more prone to violence than non-fundamentalists since most people committing violence are not religious.

#### **4.4 The field of Critical Terrorism Studies about religious violence**

Following the attacks of 9/11, there has been immense interest and rise in research related to terrorism. Terrorism has become one of the most significant symbols in modern society. CTS is a subfield of terrorism studies and by applying critical approach, it challenges the mainstream discourse about terrorism created within the traditional field of terrorism studies (TTS) (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning, Smyth, 2011). CTS scholars consider terrorism as a social fact rather than a brute fact and argue that the nature of terrorism is not based on the violent act itself but is related to the context where usually political, social, economic and other factors play the crucial role in inspiring the terrorism (ibid). Furthermore, the research of CTS scholars reveal that mainly state-sponsored scholars and security experts undertake most of the research on terrorism whose findings articulate states' perspectives, while it is necessary to approach terrorism as any other form of political violence, not treat it as a unique form of "evil", and make of it a sensation. In relation to terrorism, experts from TTS employ the problem-solving approach that takes for granted the present power structures and tries to settle the "problems" that menace the status quo. According to the position of scholars from CTS such problem-solving approach has created a number of serious drawbacks like the absence of context, equating state and human security, neglecting state violence that is not less brutal than non-state terrorism and operating to endorse Western hegemony (ibid).

With regard to the connection between religion and violence, CTS experts argue that the key category like "religious terrorism" is analytically unhelpful and misleading, while TTC treats this category as clearly distinguishable from the secular realm and uses as an explanation of such connection. The arguments discussed in the above section "violent fundamentalism" are developed within the TTC, for which religious terrorism is "specific" type of violence radically different from other types of violence since it is "characterized by transcendent, utopian or religious goals – in contrast to the supposedly more pragmatic and limited political aims of the 'old', secular terrorism" (Gunning&Jackson, 2011, p. 371). Cavanaugh (2009) in his famous work the "Myth of religious violence" writes that it has become a conventional wisdom that religion "is prone to violence because it is absolutist, divisive, and non-rational,

from a “secular,” or non-religious, reality that is less prone to violence, presumably because it is less absolutist, more unitive, and more rational” (p.16). However, he notes that it is not that obvious as it seems and before making such opinions, it is necessary to define what is “religion”. Religious studies literature brings under the category of religion “totems, witchcraft, the rights of man, Marxism, liberalism, Japanese tea ceremonies, nationalism, sports, free market ideology” (ibid, p.22) and many other institutions and practices. If one tries to define religion as belief in God or gods than certain belief systems often regarded as “religions” could not be considered as such since Buddhism, Confucianism, Theravada and many other religions simply lack the concept of God. If the definition is extended to include these religions than all kinds of practices and ideologies (for example, Marxism, or nationalism), which are often marked as “secular” can be categorized as a religion, therefore be no less violent. For him, the essential problem in the notion of “religious violence” is the misunderstanding of the term “religion”. Until the modern era, religion and political institutions were inseparable, for example, bloody sacrifices of Aztecs had not only religious but also political meaning. Religion as a category of human activity comes from the Western civilization when the rise of the modern state and secularization in Europe in 16 century had led to the separation of religion from political life. Armstrong<sup>72</sup> (2014) shares Cavanaugh’s argument that the western idea of the word “religion” (that lacks any political component) is very narrow and finds it to impossible to apply western comprehension of “religion” to other religious practices and ideologies. For example close to the word “religion” the Arabic word “din” means the entire system of life that regulates spiritual, political, social and all other aspects of human’s life, the Sanskrit “dharma” is belief system, law, politics and social norms, while Jewish Talmud simply says that it is not possible to explain religion. For her Gandhi’s expression: “Those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means” demonstrates that “religion” is a complicated phenomenon not limited to the belief in God only”.

Armstrong (2014) takes an example of Turkey to demonstrate how secular nationalism can turn to violence. Ataturk, who founded secular Turkey in 1918, deliberately excluded Islam from the public life as it was perceived as something outdated and hampering the progress. This made him famous as a progressive secularist but on the other side such fame came at a bloody price when Armenians and Greeks that for centuries peacefully lived in Turkey were violently persecuted because of the rise of nationalistic ideas. Consequences of such secularization and nationalism are felt up to now, as Turkey has not recognized Armenian genocide.

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<sup>72</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/25/-sp-karen-armstrong-religious-violence-myth-secular>

Concerning the question of how “religious” is actually the religious terrorism, Gunning and Jackson (2011) write that Hezbollah or Hamas traditionally referred as religious terroristic groups, hardly fit in such labelling, as most of their leaders are secular professionals and motivations of the groups are not necessarily religious. The main problem is approaching these groups and many others as “religious” as it downplays the “secular” characteristics of groups. Besides the term “religious” can be interpreted in countless different ways even if the groups position themselves as religious it does not say much about its actual goals, attitudes and behavior.

In general, the CTS field does not degrades the potential of religion to inspire violence but argues that the contemporary approach to this problem does not reflect the complexity of relations between religion and violence. In this regard, it is important to treat a religion as any other set of beliefs as it will make it possible to remove the “secularism” from the study and treat concepts of “religion”, “religious violence” from the multidisciplinary approach.

#### **4.5 Summary**

The chapter has outlined the conceptual framework of the thesis. As the main purpose of the thesis is to understand the connection between religion and violence a number of concepts like jihad, fundamentalism, peace, peacebuilding and arguments developed within CTS field have been discussed in the present chapter. I have started with the concept of jihad, as being a central concept in Islam in relation to violence and notorious since 9/11 it was found to be relevant in illuminating the problem under study. Being a complex phenomenon that incorporates such opposing notions like a spiritual and physical struggle, jihad was presented as a concept highly dependent on the interpretation of the religious texts and practices. Further, the concepts of peace and peacebuilding were chosen to complement the concept of jihad and illustrate which kind of jihad prevailed in the reflections of informants. Peace and peacebuilding in Islam that put at the forefront the notion of justice are understood as moral obligations that Muslims should have and practice.

Fundamentalism has to do with purification of religion and criticism of other ways of life that challenges the position of religion. The thesis concerns itself with this concept because it determines Muslims’ attitudes, Muslims are often labelled as fundamentalists and it gives an analytical frame to see the “degree of religiosity” of informants. All of these concepts have overlapping characteristics, if considered in combination they gave a general outline of the connection between religion and violence, and were helpful in explaining the complexities and nuances of religious informants’ worldviews.

If the above-mentioned concepts offer mainly the religious explanation of the relation of religion and violence, then CTS field by challenging the existing power relations and religious-secular dichotomy argues that the concept of “religious violence” is a myth constructed within a secular realm and is a modern invention. Such arguments are used as a general framework that help to illustrate how informants understand religion, if their ideologies are compatible with the secular reality and if such myth really exists in the country? Because of the dominant opinion in the country that religion has a great potential to turn to violence, the thesis tries to direct attention to how the interpretation of religion affects peoples’ actions and reasoning. These questions will be presented in the next chapters where I try to demonstrate the dialogue between concepts and the empirical data gathered during the fieldwork.



## **Chapter 5. Data presentation and analysis: second group of informants**

This chapter presents and analyzes the perspectives of the second group of informants/experts about radicalization of Islamic movements in Kyrgyzstan and possibility of religious violence. People of different backgrounds represent this group of experts: two Imams, one government official, one employee from the State Committee for National Security (SCNS), three experts on religious issues. The chapter begins with the focus on informants' backgrounds as they can have an impact on opinion and attitude formation. Although the conceptual framework discussed in the previous chapter mainly addresses the issues discussed with the main group of respondents, nevertheless some aspects of this framework speak to the positions of the second group of informants as well.

These informants' perspectives are given as an extraneous assessment of the religious situation in the country with the focus on the activities of the "radical" Islamic movements and together with the data presented by the first group can provide a more comprehensive picture about the violence potential of the movements targeted in this work.

### **5.1 Informant presentation**

#### **5.1.1 Background of informants**

The second group is composed of seven informants. Table 1 presents the educational, occupational, gender backgrounds and information about the religious affiliation of informants. All informants had higher educations from secular or religious institutions and Universities. Six males and one female represent this group. The interviewees were aged between 28 and 46. All experts in this group had either academic interests in or working experience with the religious matters, so it was expected that they were aware of the recent trends in the religious situation of the country. Informants considered themselves as Muslims, but four of them were practicing Muslims<sup>73</sup> and three non-practicing.

Two Imams did not refer themselves to any religious movements. One of the Imams, Abdurrahman had a one-year training on the course "World religions" in the Leipzig University in Germany. He was 40 years old, of Dungan ethnicity and for the last 18 years has been in the position of Imam in the village mainly inhabited by Dungans. He can be regarded, as a

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<sup>73</sup> It is a common thing in Kyrgyzstan that someone, for example, can drink alcohol but at the same time go to mosque for Friday prayer. A number of other examples of such odd combinations makes it difficult to draw a separation line between practicing and non-practicing Muslims. My observations suggest that those who follow the basic requirement of Islam like praying five times a day are usually tend to be more observant of other Islamic requirements. Therefore, under the "practicing Muslim" I imply those who pray five times a day.

hereditary Imam as his father, grandfather and great-grandfather were Imams as well. It is noteworthy that due to his religious and educational activities, few years ago the majority of villagers supported his initiative to ban the sale of alcohol in the village. Another Imam, Nurmat was 38 years old, Kyrgyz and has been on this post for the last six years. He had short-term religious courses in Tatarstan and Turkey. He was from a non-religious family and before studied at the secular University; however, he did not complete it and instead chose a religious way of life and education.

Zakir Chotaev is a Deputy Director of the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA) under the President of Kyrgyzstan. He was a member of the working group on development of the Concept Paper on the State Policy in the sphere of religion (2014-2020). This concept determines state's main directions and principles in the regulation of activities of religious organizations and associations.

A representative from the SCNS who preferred to stay anonymous noted that his job is not directly related to religious issues. However, due to the specifics of his workplace, he shared that he has an idea and information about the current religious situation.

Kadyr Malikov<sup>74</sup> is a famous Islamic scholar in Kyrgyzstan, often cited by local and foreign experts writing about Kyrgyzstan. He is actively engaged in the public and religious life of the country and is a member of various state and non-state commissions on religious matters. His main specialization during his education was Islamic Law (Sharia) and Politics.

Roman Veitsel is an expert on religious matters and mainly writes about Islam and Islamization in the country. Few years ago, he converted from Christianity to Islam.

Mukaram Toktogulava is an Associate Professor at the anthropological department at the American University in Central Asia (AUCA). Her area of interest is Islam in general and TJ movement in particular. She has several publications about the peculiarities of this movement in Kyrgyzstan mainly based on qualitative data gathered during her fieldworks within Kyrgyzstan and India (place of origin of TJ).

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<sup>74</sup> In November 2015 he was attacked by two men, and was hospitalized with serious cuts on the face and neck areas. He stated that this was an assassination attempt from the members of ISIS due to his religious activities and criticism of this movement. However, public divided into supporters and opposers of this version, as many uncertainty accompanied this incident. Attackers were detained long ago but until now, their motivations were not made public that makes the case vaguer.

**Table 1. Interviewees' educational, occupational, gender backgrounds and religious affiliation**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Field of occupation</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Religion</b>
Abdurrahman	Imam of the mosque in the Deishin village, Kara-Kol city	Male	Islamic Institution in the Tokmok city (Kyrgyzstan)	Practicing Muslim
Nurmat	Imam of one of the mosques in the Bishkek city	Male	Islamic institution in the Bishkek city	Practicing Muslim
Zakir Chotaev	Deputy Director of the SCRA	Male	Ph.D. in International Relations, Ankara State University (Turkey)	Non-practicing Muslim
Anonymous expert	Employee at the SCNS	Male		Non-practicing Muslim
Kadyr Malikov	Director of the independent analytical center “Religion, Law and Politics”. Lecturer at the OSCE academy and the AUCA	Male	Ph.D. in Politics and Islamic studies, Autonomous University of Madrid (Spain) MA in Islamic Law, University of Jordan	Practicing Muslim
Roman Veitsel	Junior Research Fellow at the Institute of Strategic analysis and prognosis under the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University	Male	Ph.D. student, Institute of Strategic analysis and prognosis under the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University	Practicing Muslim
Mukaram Toktogulova	Associate Professor at the Anthropological Department at the AUCA	Female	Ph.D. in Philology, National Academy of Sciences (Kyrgyzstan)	Non-practicing Muslim

## **5.2 Attitudes and perspectives of informants from the second group**

It is worth noting that for all experts in this group, Islam itself was not problematic and its nature was not violent. However, some experts noted that the movements under study get religious inspiration based on the misinterpretation of certain Islamic teachings and principles

that has a potential to turn to violence depending on the influence of mainly non-religious factors. For other informants, movements' ideologies do not support violence and the problem is the confusion of the non-violent fundamentalism with the religious terrorism among secular part of society. All informants were unanimous over a matter of a low level of religious and secular knowledge among Islamic movements. Based on the areas of work and interests, respondents are separated into three groups: Imams, government representatives and experts in religious issues.

### **5.2.1 Imams**

Imams, possessing somewhat intermediate position between the second and the primary group, as in the ideological sense they were neither outsiders nor complete insiders, presented interesting opinions. Interesting from the point that Imams having similar religious posts, religious education and interacting with parishioners had opposing attitudes towards the religious situation in the country and to the “radical” Islamic movements.

I will start with the narrative of Imam Abdurrahman. He emphasized that he belongs to the “Ahl al-Sunnah wal Jamaah”<sup>75</sup> branch of Islam or the group, which follows the Sunna of the Prophet. Accordingly, followers of this branch are on the right religious path. I had to clarify this moment as all of the informants from the primary group referred themselves to this branch as well, which would mean, according to his logic, that they were “right” Muslims. Imam agreed that they might follow the Sunna or tradition of the Prophet, however, do it selectively as principles of their groups can emphasize certain Sunnas but disregard others. Therefore, this brings discordances to the understanding of the true meaning of Islam. He clearly separated ideology of TJ movement from Salafi and HuT, claiming that the first group is generally not dangerous, but the other two have ideologies similar to Wahhabis, accordingly have potential to commit violence: “They do not understand the meaning of jihad, they do not know Sharia [...] jihad is killing your inner Devil but not Kafirs [non-believers]”. However, he made a remark that not necessarily all members of the given groups are violent, but there are always radical members who are ready to take physical actions. Yet Imam was rather suspicious towards TJ's activities, as he was skeptical about the level of religious education of the members:

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<sup>75</sup> Ahl al-Sunnah wal Jamaah from Arabic means People of the Sunnah and the Community

Making dawah is an important part of religion and the beloved Prophet Muhammad used to do it all his life, but these people do not have proper education and every person should go on dawah if he is TJ member. What does he has in mind? What is his level of knowledge? His ignorance can do more harm to religion than good things. Sometimes dawaatchy come here, but I give them strict instructions that if they want to make dawah I need to be present there and they can cover certain topics only.

According to him, Islam should be practiced when the person is spiritually ready but not because somebody (i.e. Islamic movements) frightens you with horrors of the inferno. He gives an example that one woman from his village went on a dawah tour with TJ members and on her return started to wear hijab: “After some time I see he dancing on one event. I was very frustrated and talked with her husband that it is better not wear it than to insult Islam. Therefore, I keep saying to my parishioners not to do things they are spiritually not ready for. Islam is not a game”. For Imam, the revival of Islam is a mercy from God and a big trial as well, since a person can easily slip on a wrong way.

Imam modestly noted that he would not like to glorify his merits, but his village is often held up as an example of a “good” village in terms of a moral behavior of its inhabitants. He says:

Yesterday’s alcoholics today occupy the first rows in my mosque. They made a big jihad over their addiction and even if Wahhabis would try to recruit them, I know they will not follow. [...] Being Imam for almost twenty years, I have met many members from these movements [TJ, Salafi and HuT] and I cannot ban them from coming to the village. This requires from me to be more responsible in a sense of working hard to explain the true meaning of the Quran to my parishioners, to prevent them from the wrong path. Maybe because of it, there are no followers of these movements in this place. Sometimes I hear about religious conflicts in other villages. All Muslims are brothers to each other, hardly anyone would argue with this verity and yet members of Islamic movements do conflicts. How dare they call themselves “true” Muslims then and teach others?

The other problem in his view, maybe more threatening to the security of the country than activities of Islamic movements, is the influence of third forces interested in destabilization of the religious situation in the country: “There were two revolutions sponsored by external forces, now it is very easy to escalate the present religious situation”. He did not name exactly whom he implied under the “third forces”, vaguely denoting them as some countries and groups of people interested in controlling the world. For Imam a 1.5 billion of Muslims and the fact that it is the fastest growing religion in the world makes it obvious that some powers would like

to control Islamization: “It is hard to seduce Muslims with alcohol or zina<sup>76</sup>, but it is possible to provoke their revenge [make them abuse the concept of jihad] and divide them ideologically”. Therefore, there exist so many “radical” Islamic movements with distorted ideas.

Imam was very disappointed with the present face of Islam as for centuries, Muslims in Kyrgyzstan while practicing Islam of Hanafi Madhab and following the Sunna never had religious conflicts and were tolerant towards others. While now Muslims from Kyrgyzstan are willing to be “a cannon fodder” when join ISIS. He said that his “heart bleeds” when he sees how the religion of “peace, purity, submission to the will of God” is misinterpreted either because of lack of knowledge among members of Islamic movements or because of external influence.

Imam had a rather alarming prognosis about the religious situation. In his view, unless the Government takes urgent measures the country could easily turn into the battlefield. He personally supported the ban on activities of HuT and Salafi movements but expressed regret that it has little effect as they continue to operate without calling themselves by the name of the group. Therefore, he finds it extremely important to have a subject about religions at school, so that a person since his childhood would know what the real Islam, Christianity and other religions mean. Imam repeated many times that knowledge would keep away a person from radical movements. Regarding his knowledge, he showed many old books printed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and noted that he largely draws knowledge from these books brought by his great grandfather from Kazan (Tatarstan)<sup>77</sup>. When he compares new editions of the same books he finds many discrepancies, for him, this could be another source of problem in the interpretation of religion. He concluded with the words of the Prophet who said: “The ink of the scholar is more holy than the blood of the martyr”.

Second Imam, Nurmat, regarded this interview as an opportunity to present his views about Islam in a manner that would be more nuanced compared to the biased media representation of this religion. Although he did not attribute himself to any religious movement, I had a feeling that either he belongs to TJ or sympathizes them. To my question about the “radical” ideologies of Islamic movements in the country, he expressed an opinion that he personally does not find their ideologies as violent. For him, it is on the contrary misunderstanding of these movements among non-religious members of the society that creates problems. He tried to explain it based on his own example.

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<sup>76</sup> Zina in Islam means illicit sexual relations.

<sup>77</sup> One of the centers for publishing of Islamic literature

Like many Muslims in our country, I believed that there is some God, but knew almost nothing about Islam and my religiosity was limited to not eating pork. [...] I cannot say that I had a negative attitude to religious people but I simply could not understand their way of life. Thanks Allah, when he guided me into Islam I reconsidered all my life and met many representatives of the movements you are talking about. Here, I want to note that I am not taking sides, I am saying what I see and hear. Same as me, their ideologies does not support ISIS, they want changes by peaceful means, they try to live as normal members of the society and practice their religion. Unfortunately, today the problem with these movements is too politicized and inflated.

Imam noted that in his opinion the most numerous group in the country is TJ, which makes important job in a sense that it replaces the government's functions in some social matters: "I am sure that it is due to activities (dawah) of TJ that many people stopped drinking alcohol, have stronger moral values, reconsidered their way of life. They warn about jihadi ideology". He agreed that not many members of TJ have proper religious education, but according to him, their ideology initially was not focused on getting sophisticated religious knowledge but rather based on spreading teachings on how to practice Islam, like making prayers, fasting, knowing basics of Islamic values. However, for him, the society thinks stereotypically and heavily influenced by the image of Islam propagated in the media. In his view, this is a serious problem as misunderstandings between secular and religious part of the society is growing and he was not sure what it would result in: "There is a mutual criticism from both sides, each of the sides believes in own truth, it is a high time for a dialogue". To my question that if the low religious knowledge can provoke conflicts, he agreed that it certainly can, but at the same time Imam explained that if a person regularly goes out for dawah<sup>78</sup> purpose he is constantly reminded of the non-violent principles of Islam and together with religious practices "he simply does not have time and wish to think about conflicts".

About the ideology of HuT and Salafi, he gave an example of two State revolutions and expressed rather emotionally:

As you know, we had two revolutions, and who were those thousands of young people who demanded the change of the government? HuT or some Salafis who have always been calling for Islamic government? I do not think so, there are many versions – young people from rural areas, unemployed, or those who were paid to go on demonstrations, I do not know exactly but I never heard that religious people did it.

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<sup>78</sup> Imam explained that during dawah period a person lives in a mosque, where educated and experienced dawaatchy every day give them taalim (religious lectures).

However, Imam did not exclude the possibility of conflict because many other non-ideological factors can play a crucial role and gave an example of ISIS. He said that profile of those who left country to join ISIS is very diverse: some women go there to find husbands or going after their husbands, somebody wants to earn money, others simply looking for adventures. There are also those, in his opinion who go for religious reasons, but it is one of the motivations not the only, as it is presented in the media. He explained that even if they go to jihad based on religious grounds, it is still contradicts to Islamic laws, as there needs to be a recognized Islamic authority who would issue a fatwa (call) for jihad: “It is known for all Islamic groups, and yet some members abuse this ruling out of ignorance or misinterpretation”. He added: “It is said that many who join ISIS are members of HuT, I don’t know if it is true, I spoke with some HuT members and did not hear that they were supportive of war in Syria”. In his view, it should be apparent for every “normal” Muslim that ISIS has little to do with the religion, as those who suffer the most from this group are innocents rather than oppressors.

Imam noted that Salafism is not easy to explain, as there are many types of Salafism. In his opinion, Salafis certainly have a puritanical interpretation of Islam when they try to live like the early predecessors, but somebody go as far as literally try to replicate predecessors’ life in practice, for example, reject modern technologies like the use of TV as it did not exist during that old days while others adapt to modern realities. In his opinion if the person practices Salafism it does not mean that he is violent, but if he dreams of Islamic Caliphate which existed during predecessors than it can create problems. However, he mentioned that this group of Jihadi Salafis is a minority, as they do not have broad support from other Salafis and probably those who share ideology of jihad as a warfare had already left to Syria.

With regard to the religious situation, Imam finds it as stable as he doubts that religious movements would be interested in destabilizing the situation. Yet, he emphasized that religion calls for self-improvement and working for the benefit of the society but “there will always be people who are willing to use religion as a façade”.

### **5.2.2 Government representatives**

Chotaev specified that Islamization is perceived as something negative in Kyrgyzstan, but in his understanding it is a rise of interest in Islam among people and that this interest is not dangerous in itself. However, he made a remark that “unfortunately, the interest in Islam in the current realities is accompanied by the low level of religious knowledge both among those who is interested in Islam and those who share with religious knowledge”. Like the first Imam,



Chotaev emphasized that poor level of religious education among Islamic movements results in the distortion of Islamic values.

He referred to the Concept Paper on the State policy in the sphere of religion that distinguishes Sunni Islam and Orthodox Christianity as traditional religions in Kyrgyzstan. In relation to the Sunni Islam, Chotaev explains, that the concept indicates that the government supports the Sunni Islam of Hanafi School, which historically was an authentic religion in Central Asia and tolerated local traditions and practices. Therefore, he stated that those movements like HuT that call for the overthrow of secularism or Salafis who call for violent jihad and promote takfirism<sup>79</sup> or TJ that criticize local traditions contradict to the principles of Hanafi madhab and are subject to be called to account for such ideas. Chotaev emphasized that the government is preoccupied with the current religious situation as existing level of radicalization can be transformed into violent form. Therefore, the adoption of the Concept was timely and by specifying which religions the country supports and stressing the importance of religious education, the Concept reflects state's aspirations to control the process of radicalization and to take preemptive measures. He mentioned that within the action plan recommended in the Concept and for the purpose of prophylaxis of radicalization, in the nearest future the school program would be extended to include the subject "World religions" and more close cooperation with official religious organizations would be worked through.

A popular argument in the country that the poor socio-economic conditions push a person to embrace radical worldviews was rejected by Chotaev as in his opinion these conditions mainly stimulate interest in religion, but again it is the low level of religious knowledge that turns a person into a "radical". Chotaev gave an example of how perverted idea can be deeply rooted in a person: "Our theologians worked with jihadi Muslims, based their arguments on the Quran, numerous hadiths and yet these Muslims were impossible to convince in the fallacy of their ideology". Chotaev agreed with my notice that Islam is an integrated and complex concept that encompasses principles of political, social and economic regulations. However, he stressed that firstly we live in the secular society where a separation of religion from the state is enshrined in the Constitution and secondly the traditional Islam of Hanafi Madhab had not intervened into political regulation since the old times and developed in harmony with local traditions and took into account cultural values, mentality. Therefore, he referred again to the Concept to explain that state's position was to support a moderate Islam and moderate Muslims. In his opinion, the political values of Islam are not at the forefront of

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<sup>79</sup> Takfirism or takfiri ideology – accusation of a Muslim in apostasy, as well as judging a non-Muslim to be an unbeliever.

this religion and Islam is primarily oriented on the spiritual support and improvement person's inner world. He added that even if he operates with pure religious arguments than the Prophet Muhammad's statement that an Islamic Caliphate would exist only for the first thirty years after him and then only Sultanates (monarchies not wholly based on religious principles), can be a solid counter argument against the radical ideas of modern Muslims demanding old style Islamic rule. Although history gives an example of the Ottoman Caliphate, Chotaev noted that it had more features of Sultanate rather than of the first Caliphate existed during the Prophet.

He noted that if the Quran and the Sunna were understood correctly then the problem of radicalization would not exist. He said: "I read the Quran and for me the call for violence is a right to protect yourself, family and property, same as it is in any modern states, if you are attacked you have a right to response back, if your country is attacked you mobilize an army".

An expert from the SCNS shared with his concerns about the religious situation, as he could see some indicators of its escalation. According to him, the religious situation was more or less stable in the northern part of the country while radicalization on the southern part that was traditionally more religious has considerably raised and is difficult to regulate. He was highly convinced that almost all members of the mentioned movements are prone to conflicts, both violent (if the right moment comes) and non-violent. However, he made a segregation according to the ethnical belonging of the "radicals" claiming that Uzbeks are more "radicalized". He explained that since the ethnic conflicts between Kyrgyz and Uzbek ethnicities on the south of the country in 2010, Uzbeks had demonstrated a tendency to isolate themselves within the borders of their mahallas<sup>80</sup> and limited communication with others: "It is very difficult to get access to these areas, people have a city within a city. Although many mahallas were destroyed after the conflict, people still hesitate to integrate". This situation in his view was very dangerous as people living there oppose secular values and become "more religious, turned inward and get brainwashed by non-educated Muslims". He noted that majority of practicing Muslims of Uzbek ethnicity are either followers or sympathizers of HuT's ideology as the main aim of HuT to build just Islamic Government/State is close for the aspirations of the Uzbeks: "After the conflict they feel that their rights were restricted and they always wanted an autonomy". According to him, these isolated areas are not unique for Uzbeks only, he mentioned that there are cases when entire Kyrgyz villages became followers of TJ or even HuT.

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<sup>80</sup> Mahalla - areas/districts in the south of the country inhabited by people of Uzbek ethnicity.

I mentioned that the actions of the SCNS are found as excessively stiff by human rights organizations and religious people as often Muslims are imprisoned without thorough investigations mainly based on the extremist literature found with them. He responded that it is a necessary preemptive measure as calling for the overthrow of the government often declared by ISIS and HuT is a serious signal of radicalization and there is a high need to eradicate the harmful ideas from these Muslims, therefore, the SCNS's actions were adequate as the matter of the peace was at stake. He mentioned that there is a special department within the SCNS responsible for the investigation of religious extremism and members of this department are duty-bound to know the theological aspects of Islam in order to communicate with and provide arguments to the followers of Islamic movements. He joked that people from this department are more religiously literate than many Imams at least when it comes to the understanding of the concept of violence in Islam.

He also mentioned that the appearance of ISIS had boosted "radicalization" level, as HuT and Salafi members that were relatively moderate get inspired by the ideology of the ideal state proposed by ISIS and some members either left the country to join the group or sympathize the ISIS. He stressed that many external religious agents with perverted ideologies brainwash local Muslims and recruit them to join ISIS. In conclusion, he shared with his philosophical observation of what a delicate matter the religion was, when based on interpretation it could inspire one for violence or it could create peace and harmony.

### **5.2.3 Experts on religious issues**

Malikov started with an explanation of the legitimacy of violence in Islam:

Any state has legitimate authority to sanction and exercise violence. Same in Islam, if we take it as a state-forming system than it certainly has the same power. The Quran and the hadiths have the concepts of punishment, criminal penalty, jihad in the form of defensive or offensive warfare. Therefore, the signs of a state are present here and legitimacy of the use of violence both within a country and against other countries (international relations) is regulated by the Sharia. A Caliph (similar to President) who is an elected body must govern an Islamic state and there should be a Shura – a consultative body (similar to Parliament), which considers the legitimacy of Caliph's policy according to Sharia. Here we see again all attributes of a state where the use of violence is subject to the strict rulings and cannot take place based on the will of any Muslim.

Further, he distinguished the Khawarijs those "Muslims" who go beyond the understanding of the principles of the Islamic state or of the Caliphate and he explained that

when Khawarijs appeared during the first century of Islam the practice of violence had been in the essence of their ideology. According to Malikov after they assassinated Ali the fourth Caliph and the son in law of the Prophet Muhammad, this movement was strongly condemned by the Muslim Umma (community) and for centuries, they were not so numerous and active as they are today. As a modern day Khawarijs, Malikov distinguished the so-called ISIS which has a self-proclaimed Caliph and own version of Sharia. Malikov noted that it is not only his opinion but also of the 99% of the Islamic clergy from all countries, who, regardless if they were Wahhabis from Saudi Arabia or Hanafis from Turkey issued official fatwas (decisions) that declared violence committed by the ISIS as illegitimate and the group as non-Islamic. For Malikov this movement's ideology was the most dangerous as there is a rising number of local Muslims who support ISIS.

In his opinion, the “radical” Islamic movements' ideologies that the study was interested in were not violent but he emphasized that a person is seldom guided in his actions by the religious principles only as a big number of other factors influences on how he perceives and practices religion. Malikov noted that many people, especially youth are concerned with the self-identification problem and this has to do with their inner condition but the external challenges are no less heavy, as hard socio-economic and unstable political situation affect peoples' lives a lot. He says that somebody takes either a book or a weapon to adapt to the changes around. Therefore, when a person enters a religion his background, his life history is important as often his actions in the name of religion both violent and non-violent can be triggered by non-religious factors. Malikov paid attention to the education: “Depending on the level of education both religious and secular each person has its own understanding of Islam, many Muslims understand it as a mere set of rituals, others see only political part of Islam that ideally has the aim to have a just society, others see something else”.

Another problem identified by Malikov was the merger of criminal structures with the religion. He pointed that when criminals face the ideologies, which say that someone has a right to judge others, grab property and even kill then they accept this religious ideology without much questioning as it is close to their criminal background. For Malikov, the influence of takfiri ideology of ISIS and religious criminal structures that can be found among any Islamic movements is a serious problem. However, he stressed that original ideologies of the movements under study were not violent but as he noted many times a number a factors influences the interpretation of these ideologies through the lenses of violence. Malikov was rather critical of the state's policy stating that in the building of the constructive dialogue between the secular and the religious part of the population the state should take an active part

and be a mediator. He noted that the state's harsh religious policy results in the marginalization of practicing Muslims who live in a kind of ghetto which is a reality in many European countries but it is a ridiculous for Kyrgyzstan where 90% are Muslims. However, halal shops, Islamic schools and kindergartens, avoidance of contacts with the secular Muslims has become normal thing. According to Malikov the state's policy which is suspicious to any religious person who starts to wear hijab or pray can only lead to the further marginalization and radicalization of Muslims. In his opinion there should be bridge building initiatives from both sides otherwise, the present situation has a great conflict potential.

Another expert - Veitsel considered the religious situation as a stable but potentially complex. He also emphasized the non-violent nature of the studied movements, but as an indicator of the degree of radicalization, Veitsel referred to ISIS and informed that there are facts that mainly Salafi and HuT members join ISIS. He noted that at the first glance this information should warn that these movements have violent ideologies but in his perspective, it is the lack of religious education and non-religious factors (similar to mentioned by Malikov) that inspire them to go there. He corrected his idea by adding that there are those who go there for the sake of the religion as well, but those who do it based on the pure religious motives are the minority. He noted that recently there had been many cases of people coming back from Syria disappointed in the methods and real ideals of ISIS. In his opinion, the initial euphoria about the ideals of ISIS had been gradually fading away as ISIS have gained strong criticism both in the media and among religious people. However, Veitsel mentioned the success of online recruitment, when the so-called internet Imams are able to inflict own ideology on Muslims.

Based on his fieldwork observations he concluded that a person who has a basic understand of Islam is much harder to incline towards the radical ideology while those who know little about Islam (mainly secular Muslims) can easily fall under the influence of the ideologies of radical movements. In this regard, he singled out TJ as a movement that basically works on the prevention of radicalization. He noted that through their dawah missions they have a possibility to reach a large number of population and taken that many people are interested in religion it is usually the members of TJ that are the first to introduce Islam. While explaining the factors of radicalization, Veitsel interrupted himself by saying that generally everything finds its roots in politics: "ISIS was created based on the geopolitical and economic interests of certain countries, HuT openly declares own political aims, behind any religious actions the true motives are often politics and power relations". Veitsel noted the role of the government whose policy is mainly oriented on the dealing with the outcomes rather than with

the causes of radicalization. Despite the Concept Paper on the State policy in the sphere of religion emphasizes the preventive measures like raising awareness about the true nature of Islam, Veitsel was skeptical about this part, as it requires strong political will and financial resources to implement in practice. However, he concluded optimistically that majority of “radical” Muslims have a common sense and basically want to be left alone with their religious practices and generally are not aimed to eradicate secular values.

Toktogulova, also an expert in religious issues, mainly focused on TJ since it represented her main area of academic interest. According to her, this movement has a peaceful ideology and it strongly opposes involvement in any political issues, which has to do with the history of TJ (constant struggles between Hindus and Muslims made the founder of TJ focus only on the practical matters of religion and avoid politics - the main source of confrontations at those times). Toktogulova joked that this must be the best quality the state could ever wish from their citizens<sup>81</sup>. She considers TJ as the most numerous movement in Kyrgyzstan due to the mobility of its members as their main activity is performing dawah countrywide, which helps to recruit new members. According to Toktogulova, “for more than a 90 years history of TJ there were no any precedents to consider TJ as an extremist organization”. She also noted that in the “fight for souls”, there is a competition among various religious movements of Islamic and Christian kinds, but TJ is the most successful. However, like the previous respondents, she stressed problem of religious knowledge, as in her opinion TJ has a superficial Islamic knowledge. According to her, their religious knowledge is usually limited to the few books of TJ that are focused on practical matters of Islam and stories from the Prophet’s life. She shared with an interesting observation that the Islamic movements in the country could be considered as a kind of a ladder, when a person first becomes a TJ member and then on the next step, if he seeks for more nuanced religious knowledge he becomes a Salafi or member of other movements that emphasize the need for Islamic knowledge.

She noted that although TJ is banned in Kyrgyzstan, it continues to operate rather openly and free as have strong support from the Muftiate – the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan, mainly composed of TJ members. For her this was an odd situation when the state criticizes TJ and at the same time ignores the Muftiate’s support of dawah missions of TJ. However, she mentioned that there is a positive side as well, as Muftiate works on the improvement of the image of TJ.

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<sup>81</sup> She implied the high politization of the society. Any political matters induce vivid interest among youth and old people and often state’s actions are scrutinized with a critical eye.

For example, TJ is mainly accused of Arabization as their dresses, long beards represent the different culture. Now, TJ is trying to adapt to local realities by supporting local traditions, encouraging wearing local styles of dresses that do not contradict to Islam. Members are advised to wear traditional headwear that covers their heads.

For her, these initiatives demonstrate that from the side of TJ there are peaceful attempts to integrate into the society. As I expected based on the interviews with the above-mentioned experts, she also emphasized that the lack of education can turn a person into a dangerous radical. She stressed that it is hard to evaluate the religious situation and that she cannot give an exact answer to this since the process of Islamization is versatile and the country had never faced processes of westernization, transformation from the Soviet legacy, religious revival, and search for national self-identification taking place all at once. Toktogulova mentioned that the cultural background of Kyrgyz people and the recent atheistic past blended with the western values would be powerful enough to maintain Kyrgyzstan as a democratic and not Islamic country.

### **5.3 Summary**

The perspectives of the second group of informants were presented in this chapter. Different, often polar perspectives presented by the informants were, probably of a little help in detecting the “level” of violence potential of the “radical” Islamic movements but were significant in reflecting the versatility of the process of radicalization and complexity of the present religious situation. The results indicated that, for some experts the problems with radicalization of Muslims have a threatening level while for others these problems were exaggerated. However, on what all informants expressed unanimous opinion was the problem of religious literacy and knowledge among Muslims of Kyrgyzstan. Based on this problem, all experts emphasized the need for the adequate religious education controlled by the government. For the majority of the experts, the problem of the “violent” ideologies was not rooted in Islam but rather in the interpretation of the Islamic texts and the traditions. This interpretation, in the perspectives of the informants, was inspired by various motives both of the religious and predominantly of non-religious factors, like political interests, financial, personal characteristics (human factor). Many referred to ISIS to demonstrate the fact that Muslims from Kyrgyzstan, that were traditionally considered as moderate, are willing to go to jihad by joining ISIS. For some experts this was a troublesome indicator, as the ideology of the movement could inspire them to go there, yet some experts noted non-religious motivations in joining ISIS.

## **Chapter 6. Data presentation and analysis – members of “radical” Islamic movements**

This chapter addresses the data in the form of individual narratives and reflections of the members of TJ, Salafi and HuT collected during the fieldwork. Primarily, the chapter focuses on the background of respondents - their education, field of occupation, age, marital status membership period in the movement. These background factors are likely to affect their opinion and position towards others.

As it was discussed in the methodology chapter, all informants' names were anonymized except one respondent who represented officially registered HuT media office in Sweden.

Secondly, the chapter attempts to disclose the interviewees' individual reflections about the ideology of the movements they are members in; it is also assumed that background and the life history of respondents may shape their interpretation of ideology. Hence, in this section, by looking at the informants' narratives through the conceptual framework laid out in chapter 4, the study seeks to explain the potentiality of religious violence in Kyrgyzstan and the degree of hazard emanating from the ideologies of the members of TJ, Salafi and HuT.

### **6.1 Informant presentation**

#### **6.1.1 Background of informants**

##### **Education and occupation**

All in all ten Muslims represent the main group of informants: three members of TJ, four members of Salafi movement and three members of HuT. Table 2 presents all the interviewees with their educational and occupational backgrounds. Seven informants had higher (university) education and represented the following fields: economics, international relations, law, journalism and Islamic studies. One was a student, one had secondary education and one had a vocational education. Two interviewees had Master's degree from Universities in Kyrgyzstan.

Two informants were unemployed and looked for a job that would be halal,<sup>82</sup> i.e. do not contradict to their religious beliefs. Two respondents stated that they run own small businesses. Among the rest of six informants, three were working according to their specialization and three in areas not connected to their education.

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<sup>82</sup> One informant explained that he used to work as a lawyer in the entertainment center, was well paid but decided to quit, as the place was not good for his iman (faith) because people came to this place to dance and to drink alcohol, also there were many non-religious women around. Other person explained that he used to work in the governmental sector and he found it as a “rotten system” where everyone follows own interests. He also mentioned his difficulties in finding place to pray there.



### **Age, marital status and living arrangements**

The informants were aged between 21 and 38. One respondent was of Dungan ethnicity, the respondent from Sweden was Uzbek and the rest were Kyrgyz. Six were married, one of them had two wives, and another was planning to have a second wife in the nearest future. The rest were singles (several of them were divorced) and were in active search of a life partner, as according to Islam it was not right to be single for long<sup>83</sup> and the marriage was important.

All informants were living in Bishkek and five informants had experience of living abroad. One of the informants noted that he spent three years working in Moscow but due to the economic crisis there, he decided to come back. Another informant studied and worked in China and since his business in Bishkek was connected with China, he had frequent travels back and forth. One informant studied in Turkey but did not complete his education and instead worked for five years there before he returned to Kyrgyzstan. The other informant used to make a business by driving cars from Germany and selling them in Kyrgyzstan but finally started a new business in Bishkek. Due to severe persecutions of HuT members in Uzbekistan, the respondent from Sweden received a political asylum there about ten years ago. According to Dolby (2004) the experience of studying abroad “provides not only the possibility of encountering the world, but of encountering oneself—particularly one’s national identity—in a context that may stimulate new questions and new formulations of that self” (p. 150). Therefore, it was expected that embracement of international and mobile lifestyle could influence the formation and change of individual’s values, worldviews and attitudes.

Not all respondents from the main group were originally from Bishkek. Three of the informants represented a southern part of the country - Osh and Batken regions. It is worth reminding that southern parts are considered to be more religious “because of the presence of a larger Uzbek population, which tends to be more observant than the Kyrgyz, but even the Kyrgyz of the south tend to be more observant Muslims than their northern counterparts” (Olcott, 2005, p. 108). The other respondents were from the northern parts of the countries and one from Sweden.

The background issues are captured in the table below. Summing up, the informants' educational and occupational choices suggest that in the majority of cases informants were well integrated into the society where they live, except the case of two informants who found it

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<sup>83</sup> Although it was not part of our main discussion, the topic of marriage was rather interesting, as it represented a certain aspect of their ideologies. For example, Salafi respondents explained that they are strict in observing the dating rulings of Islam. They informed that a man is allowed to have only three dating with a woman in presence of a male representative from her side and after this a man has to decide if he wants to marry her or not. Some of TJ and HuT members had similar opinions but added that it is hard to implement this ruling in practice.

difficult to adapt own religious beliefs in the secular society regarding the issue of getting a proper job. Further, it can be said that half of the informants had experience of living or working abroad and one of them permanently resides in Sweden.

**Table 2. Interviewees' educational, occupational, marital backgrounds, group membership, and experience from living abroad.<sup>84</sup>**

Pseudonym	Education	Specialization/field of occupation	Had been abroad/living abroad	Married	Membership /years
Azamat	Higher	Economics/ own business	X	X	TJ (7)
Sultan	Vocational education	Construction/Furniture production	X	X	Salafi (7)
Marat	Higher + MA Degree	International relations/NGO	X	X	Salafi (3)
Samat	Higher	Law /Unemployed			Salafi (6)
Kanat	Higher	Economics/Unemployed		X	HuT (4)
Nurbek	Secondary	Self-employed, own business	X		TJ (5)
Mirbek	Student	Law/Student			HuT (2)
Eldar <sup>85</sup>	Higher	Media	X	X	HuT (all his adult life)
Alia	Higher + MA Degree	Journalism/Management		X	Salafi (6)
Nurgul	Higher	Islamic studies/teacher of Arab language			TJ (8)

### **Becoming a “Muslim”**

According to Seul (1999) “religions frequently supply cosmologies, moral frameworks, institutions, rituals, traditions, and other identity-supporting content that answers to individuals' needs for psychological stability in the form of a predictable world, a sense of belonging, self-esteem, and even self-actualization” (p. 553). The rise of interest in Islam in Central Asian countries is often connected to the problems of the transition period after the dissolution of the

<sup>84</sup> The sequence of interviewees reflects the sequence of interviews

<sup>85</sup> Not a pseudonym

Soviet Union, when “high unemployment, mass poverty, social insecurity and moral malaise” (Heyat, 2004, p. 275) made some people seek refuge in religion.

Most of the respondents mentioned that although they considered themselves as Muslims they were not religious all their life and some of them led “very immoral way of life” before they embraced Islam and found reason in the particular Islamic movement. Although many reasons were numbered as motivations to come to religion, I will reflect the answers of Azamat (TJ) and Alia (Salafi) as they encompass main points shared by most of the informants.

Azamat:

The break of the Soviet system brought a collapse to the union of my parents. My father could not adapt to the changes and started to drink. It was hard times; I was still young and remember my mother working on several jobs to provide the family, there was no place for religion at that times. I was a child of the new era when everything seemed to be possible. [...] I started my small business, which became successful. [...] Money spoiled me; I used to drink, party, I was twice married. Finally, this way of life left me without my business, family and friends. That moment I lost the meaning of life. [...] I had never seriously believed in God, but I wanted to talk with him, I did not know how to pray but saw how Muslims do it, I fell on my knees and just started to cry and ask for help. Several months later, TJ members knocked on my door. This was a response from Allah; he sent them to put me on the right path. Seriously, Islam saved my life and soul.

Alia also mentioned that she was from the family of traditional Muslims and for her Islam was only associated with the image of her great-grandmother who used to pray five times a day because she was born in the pre-Soviet era and her faith stood the test of time and change of the regimes. However, Alia’s way to Islam was not accompanied by serious problems like those that Azamat had.

Alia:

I did not embrace Islam instantly; I was rather taking it in portions. First, I started fasting, then refused alcohol, started to read religious literature. I noticed that these transformations affected my inner world. [...] I started to avoid friends who liked to party, liked to gossip behind the back. All things around, which I simply ignored before started to have a new meaning. Now I see that it was a period of self-searching: I wanted to know why there is so much suffering, problems, why people were created, what I do in this world. I found many answers in Islam; I feel sorry now that I mocked my great-grandmother, now I understand her so much, she was the only enlightened and progressive person in my family. Why I became Salafi? [...] They [the first three generations after the Prophet] had the purest and right way of life, to this way of life I strive.

In general, most of the respondents told that Islam was a lifeline during difficult moments in their life, when somebody had problems with alcohol or were unemployed or led criminal lifestyle. While for others Islam was an answer for their search of meaning and understanding of the world and now Islam represented a moral guiding for them.

### **Position towards the future of Kyrgyzstan: managing desires and accepting reality**

When the interviews were asked what they thought about the future of Kyrgyzstan, whether the process of Islamization would bring the Islamic state and Sharia law or the secular state would not give up its position, interviewees did not demonstrate sharp contrast in their opinions. The members of HuT believed that the period of Islamic rule should come one day and even if it is not, it is the obligation of every Muslim to work towards this direction. Several interviewees also noted that eventually the Islamic state would take place and referred to the hadith of the Prophet who said that closer to “the end of days” the period of Islamic governance would come. However, the majority were skeptical about the possibility of Islamic rule in the country in the present reality, which was described by some as an “era of great confusions”. For all of them, life in the Islamic country was something highly desired but few believed that it was a right moment for it to come. One of the Salafi members, Sultan, replied that the ideal model of the Caliphate existed during the first three generations of Muslims and nowadays many Muslims pretend either to be religious or follow Islamic rules superficially, therefore in the present reality to speak about Caliphate or Islamic state was a utopian idea. He also expressed a sophisticated view on the statehood: “How can we say a state to be religious? The state is a created entity. It is people who make the state, and it is people we should have in mind when we mean state. It is important for people to start from themselves, be in a state of Islam rather than live in Islamic state”.

An interesting feature in the interviews with mainly TJ and Salafi members was that all of them were eager to point that basing country’s governance on Islamic principles would bring great calamities because of the fear of Islamic terrorism and violence prevailing in the heads of non-religious, majority part of the society. As Alia (Salafi) expressed “I just want to live with my religion, be able to practice it under any system, isn’t it my basic right by the Constitution?”

Given that the younger generation is usually more critical towards the restrictive and authoritarian regime of the Soviet Union, Kanat (HuT) and Azamat (TJ), expressed an unexpected opinion about the positive sides of the Soviet Union and a somewhat nostalgia about the past. According to them, Islam and the Soviet regime had a lot in common, at least when it came to the notions of morality and equality. Azamat (TJ) agreed that sometimes the Soviet

regime employed coercive measures but the majority were happy because they knew what to expect from tomorrow, they had a stable job, everybody was more or less equal. While Kanat (HuT) emphasized the degree of morality during the Soviet past, when there was respect towards elders, family values were strong and laziness was censured. According to him, this system could be comfortable for both secular and non-secular Muslims, but hardly be returned back as “the world has gone too far on the way of self-destruction and moral decay”.

When asked whether the interviewees thought any of today's Muslim countries that could reflect the ideals of Islam, nobody gave a confident answer. Surprisingly, despite practicing Muslims are often accused of arabization, only one Salafi respondent mentioned Saudi Arabia as a role model of the Islamic country. Somebody named Turkey, Malaysia and Indonesia as successful examples of combining religious and secular ideologies but in their opinion, these countries were not purely Islamic states. HuT member from Sweden pointed attention that despite Sweden is a non-Islamic state, a relative social justice, low level of corruption and transparency were presented there, which were not alien to the principles of an Islamic state as well. However, most of the respondents further reflected that there is no ideal model of an Islamic state in the modern world, and for some, it was obvious that each country had to follow own way of either secular or religious development, and not copying models.

Based on their reflections it can be said that most of the respondents were well aware of the present tense situation in the religious sphere of the country, and were not willing to promote their wish to live under the rule of Islam in the given conditions. While HuT were more inclined towards the need of the just society based on “true” version of Islam but without resorting to force.

## **6.2 “Violence” in the ideologies of “radical” Islamic movements**

Islam like other monotheistic religions (Christianity and Judaism) in its sacred scriptures, history and tradition has concepts of peace and violence. In the modern world at the mention of “violence” committed in the name of religion often an image of a terrorist announcing jihad on infidels automatically comes up in mind, or this association is even more reinforced with the beheading scenes of ISIS, all these cannot but equate jihad with violence. However, Esposito (2015) argues: “there is no single doctrine of jihad that has always and everywhere existed or been universally accepted. Muslim understanding of what is required by the Quran and the practice of the Prophet regarding jihad has changed over time” (p. 1069).

Although it was expected that particular movement would have own position towards jihad, neither informant limited his/her answer with one explanation of jihad nor did he/she emphasize particular explanation of jihad shared by the movement he belongs to. However, most of the interpretations carried a message of non-acceptability of offensive violence.

It is noteworthy that TJ members were rather hesitant to discuss “violence” in Islam and it seemed that they tried to smooth sharp corners by shifting narratives and focusing on the peaceful aspects of Islam. For example, Nurbek (TJ) a man of extraordinary personality<sup>86</sup> who spent most of his life in prison, said that he does not have enough religious knowledge to claim that his answers are trustworthy, but what was attractive in the TJ ideology for him was the strong condemnation of violence. Salafi respondents stood out from others by emphasizing their strong adherence to the “authentic religious knowledge”. According to them, the Quran was revealed in its original form, and was not rewritten as the Bible, thus is not questioned, while hadiths of the Prophet and of his early companions require “an authentic chain of transmitters”<sup>87</sup>. In this regard their answers were mostly backed by the hadiths that demonstrated that violence was a necessity for the purposes of self-defense during the Prophet’s period. Generally, HuT members also demonstrated opposition to violence based on the example of the life of the Prophet and verses of the Quran. In their views non-violent struggle for the Islamic Caliphate, which is their ultimate goal, could be attained only by attracting on their side new members without enforcement.

### **6.2.1 Jihad in a historical context**

Esposito (2015) says that understanding religious texts requires reading them within its historical context, and so thought most of the respondents. Mirbek (HuT) finds the Prophet Muhammad not only as a spiritual leader but also as a warrior who had to protect his umma (community) and explains:

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<sup>86</sup> I cannot help but mention Nurbek’s appearance and his way of talking. I randomly met him near the mosque where I was looking for Imam. In a long robe, with a thick beard, unusual for Kyrgyz, dark-skinned and with hoarse voice he instantly awoke an image of a terrorist, apparently deeply rooted in my head, despite all attempts to get rid of it. During several hours of talk I could hardly resist laughing and imagine more charming person, so unique was his speech - a jumble of prison jargon and religious expressions also mixed with his profound sense of humor. For me, this was a lesson on how the stereotype thinking can be misleading, and on the other hand a perfect example of how the complexity of human nature (both mine and of the respondent) cannot make one absolutely objective.

<sup>87</sup> Hadiths were told by the companions of the Prophet and written down by them or other Muslims, and for Salafis it was very important to establish the authenticity of the hadith. The hadith is considered as an authentic if the chain of transmitters can be traced back to that Muslim who originally told it. If somebody cites the hadith he has to be sure who originally told it and who further transmitted and explained it. The hadith can be divided into “strong” and “weak”, meaning that the “strong” hadith does not have a gap in the chain of transmitters while “weak” hadith is the one about which it is hard to say who told it first or if it has a gap in the chain of transmitters. (According to the explanation of the Salafi members).

Can you imagine how violent should be the environment at those times? The new community, headed by the Prophet had to defend itself. In this regard violence was a necessity, Muslims had to fight for their faith and otherwise Islam would not exist. [...] We had the Soviet system, democracy and secularism, and the country has even more problems than before. HuT struggles for the Caliphate and by God's will, it shall come. However, the time of the Prophet differs from nowadays; violence will only bring more troubles. [...] If there was someone like the Prophet? Yes, I would follow him whatever he calls for. However, he was the last Prophet promised by Allah.

Sultan (Salafi) corrected me by saying that it was not a right question to ask what is jihad but the proper question would be how one should use jihad in a modern context. According to him, Salafis, by imitating the way of life of the first generations of Muslims try not to go to extremes and blindly replicate every action of the "pious predecessors": "It is more important to nurture in oneself the qualities which predecessors had. Obviously, our time greatly differs from their period, in this regard we need to analyze how they would act in every given situation we have now".

By explaining historical context, respondents also emphasized the structure of the Quran. In their opinion, every verse in the Quran was bestowed in a special order depending on which condition was the Prophet at those times, and verses were given as guidelines for actions. As Eldar (HuT) expressed: "What worked for the Prophet during old times not necessarily works for us, because the context of every situation, conditions has to be taken into account". Eldar (HuT) noted that he was highly alarmed by the recent tendency of pulling out verses from the context of the Quran both by Muslims pursuing own non-religious interests and by the enemies of Muslim umma. Marat (Salafi) had a similar opinion and thought that if the so-called "sword verses" were used in practice since the day they were revealed to Muslims, probably the world would be destroyed during the first century of Islam, or today all people would become Muslims by force.

### **6.2.2 Defensive jihad**

The Quran's teachings on violence and war have long been matters of ardent debates. Nigosian (2004) argues that in "duty to halt aggression or to strive for the preservation of Islamic principles" (p. 114), a battle may be involved, where the Quran calls Muslims to "fight courageously and steadfastly against recalcitrant states, be they Muslim or non-Muslim" (p. 114). He also writes that the Quranic statements are explicit on the question of fighting in defense of Islam as a duty that has to be carried out by all means, where God gives security to Muslims, who fight for the purpose of halting or repelling aggression.

All respondents equated the violence with the right for defense. According to them, the Quran or hadiths do not command to commit illegitimate violence. I will bring Samat's (Salafi) view that generally reflected position of others:

None of those who criticize Muslims, or equate Salafis with terrorism ever bothered to open the Quran. [...] These rules [defense] do work in the modern world, even by human's instincts – if you are attacked, you do not think about religion, morality, your brain your body attacks back in a protective way. Christianity says put another cheek, but Islam is opposite – you have a right from God to protect your life, family and property. [...] This is what war in Islam or my ideology is.

It is worth having a closer look on the opinions of HuT members since this movement is perceived as the most “dangerous” one in Kyrgyzstan. According to Mirbek (HuT), HuT by promoting the idea of having an Islamic state, which is also named as a political Islam, do not support violence, not because they are afraid of the tyrannical regimes they are fighting against but because the method of the Prophet in establishing the first Islamic state by means of dawah did not include violence. For Mirbek (HuT), to adopt violent methods would mean that HuT must declare off or reinterpret own ideology. Eldar (HuT) informed that a serious number of followers represents HuT and their numbers are raising every day, therefore, they are strong enough to replace any state by using violence, but it was not how they wanted the rule of Islam to come.

Kanat's (HuT) opinion contrasted to the responses of other interviewees, and perhaps it was the most “extreme” opinion expressed among informants. He could not understand why Muslims try to reject offensive Jihad or disregard their history. In his opinion the Prophet, whom all Muslims claim to follow after he established a Caliphate, waged wars to spread Islam among polytheists. He based his arguments on the confidence that after the Islamic Caliphate would be established the other kufar (non-believers) countries would not tolerate it and Muslims would have to wage wars both to spread the “true religion” by means the Prophet used and fight against enemies of their regime. His answer did not demonstrate to me a clear-cut position on the use of defensive or offensive violence; it rather reflected the combination of both types of violence. In his understanding since the attacks from non-Muslims are inevitable there was a need for offensive wars, perhaps even before non-Muslims would start them first, yet there were defensive aims as well – protection of own religion and state before they are attacked by others. Yet, he gave some hadiths that condemned unjust violence and he added that peaceful means, which the Prophet mostly resorted to, were better options than violence and had to be followed as far as possible.



Kanat (HuT) gave an example of the defensive Jihad in the modern world based on the fighting of Palestinians, Syrians, Iraqis against Jews and US, which was lawful according to Islam since the later first attacked and occupied the territories of the former. For him, this is the response to the direct aggression and even without Caliphate Muslims have right to protect their lives and lands. He shared with his thoughts that he would use violence same as “those oppressed Muslims” if he were in the same conditions.

Kumar (1998) writes that “the Quran sanctions violence to counter violence” (p.187) and the history of Arab tribes in the pre-Islamic period show that the philosophy of peaceful resistance simply could not have worked in such environment. Esposito (2015) shares this opinion and writes that in the pre-Islamic period tribal raids and warfare were considered as normal in Arabic societies unless truces had been set between tribes. In addition, raids and warfare followed a certain ruling like the forbiddance of killing women, children and old people, and later these regulations were incorporated into Islamic law. Nurgul (TJ) shared her opinion about warfare in Islam:

Our Alims [religious scholars] say that if Muslims participate in a war, they have to follow certain rules: it is forbidden to destroy enemy’s property, to kill women, children, old, clerics, it is necessary to treat with respect the hostages and if they revert to Islam, let them free. We [TJ members] think that following of all these rules of war in Islam actually makes war impossible. So, can you see the wisdom of Islam? If one can think, he can clearly understand the message of peace in Islam.

According to Esposito & Mogahed (2007), the Quran balances permission to fight the enemy with a strong mandate for making peace. Nurgul (TJ) explained the general meaning of the verse (8:61) that calls for peace but suggested to find it in the Quran and reflect verbatim in the thesis so that TJ’s position would be clearer. The Quran (8:61): “And if they incline to peace, incline to it as well, and place your trust in God; verily. He alone is All - hearing, All knowing! And should they seek but to deceive you, behold, God is enough [security] for you”.

### **6.2.3 Killing your passions**

At the time of a meeting with the final interviewee, an expression that Islam is peace became familiar to my ear. Further, interviewees through numerous examples from the Prophet’s life and verses from the Quran elaborated this opinion. Most of the respondents mainly mentioned the verse (5:32) of the Quran: “Whoever kills a person it is as though he has killed all mankind. And whoever saves a life, it is as though he had saved all mankind”. It was particularly stressed

upon by the TJ members, who claimed that it is only Allah who has a right to give and take away life. Azamat (TJ) said the following:

Islam also means submission, we have to completely submit to the will of God. In this regard jihad is a struggle with inner self, desires, passions, nafs (selfishness) as submission requires great, enormous endeavors and sense of patience from a person if he wants to have a righteous life and eternal afterlife in the paradise. Not many Muslims follow it, they do not want to work hard in the way of religion I think that is why Islam is attacked and misunderstood by many. It is always easier to blame others than improve yourself. If I see somebody not acting correctly I may say – “have a fear of God”, but why people call it terrorism?

Azamat discussed that TJ is trying to teach what the real Islam is, without enforcing it but through inviting people to the dialogue. In his opinion, the modern world is a serious challenge as people can easily be exposed to false ideologies and be attached to the mundane life. Therefore, the basic aim of TJ is to help people find a right way of life. He gave the verse from the Quran, which calls Muslims to compete with each other in doing good things and said that it is often cited among TJ members. He found the system of TJ rather efficient since membership in TJ required going to dawah minimum three days in a month; also, it was suggested to make a four, six months dawah tours in life. Strict following of the dawah schedule and practicing it at least three days in a month was more a reminder for the dawaatchy himself about the true meaning of religion and the best prophylaxis of religious extremism. He shared his observations about the dawah content: “Until all this hype with the ISIS appeared, TJ’s primary focus was to teach people Islamic values, how to act with others, hadiths from the Prophet’s life. However, now we are reminded a lot about the danger of ISIS and admonished about their demonic ideology”. At the end of our talk, I was asked if in this interpretation of religion there could be any place or wish for violence.

Mirbek (HuT) noted that actually the verse (5:32) does not completely repulse violence as there is often violence committed either in a defensive manner or for the purposes of establishing justice, i.e. dealing with criminals. For him violence was necessary, but under the condition that it had to be regulated by the sharia, which was same as a secular jurisprudence as it works for the benefit of the society and it can perfectly regulate all aspects of human life and actions. In general, for HuT members, jihad as an ideological fight for justice in the society and against oppressive rulers who follow the interest of western hegemonies was central to their ideology. They believed that their constant jihad, Mirbek (HuT) named it propaganda, Kanat (HuT) called it dawah, would eventually bring on the side of HuT majority of Muslims. Mirbek

(HuT) cited the verse, which says that there should not be a compulsion. For him, this was a central ideology in the Prophet's conquests; therefore, HuT adopts this wisdom as well, as for him, it was absolutely obvious that nobody would become a true Muslim "if the sword is above his head".

The term jihad is applied to all forms of striving and has developed some special meanings over time (Ali, 2001). According to Ali (2001), the paramount striving or jihad should be "recognizing the creator and loving him most" and it is a big struggle to put Allah ahead of everything – family, money, worldly ambitions, own life. Especially for those who converts to Islam, it may be a tough struggle due to the pressure from the society, family and friends.

Marat (Salafi) and Samat (Salafi) had long discussions about the concepts of tawhid (the oneness of God) and shirk (belief in somebody or something other than God). In their interpretation, jihad was the struggle to stand for the position of the oneness and absolutism of God under any circumstances. From the perspective of Samat, who also stressed the problem of misunderstanding of jihad existing even among Salafi members themselves, a person is often misguided from the way of worshipping the only God. He gave an example that it was incorrect to put own family, interests and passions above God, since the readiness to abandon anything if such moment comes, was the ultimate form of jihad. Marat (Salafi) noted that everyday Salafi has to reaffirm the oneness and absolutism of God through his jihad: "Waking up during the middle of night to perform prayer is jihad over own laziness, warning about shirk is jihad as many people would disagree and humiliate you, resisting profane temptations and controlling own emotions like anger, jealousy, greediness is also jihad". He backed such position of his movement by referring to the verse (49:15) of the Quran: "The (true) believers are only those who believe in Allah and his messenger and afterward doubt not, but strive with their wealth and their selves for the cause of Allah. Such are the truthful".

### **6.3 Peaceful Fundamentalists**

According to the European Parliament (2015), "religious fundamentalism, often at the heart of radicalization, can be defined as a belief in an absolute religious truth which is challenged by the forces of evil and which must be followed today in the same way as in the past" (p.3).<sup>88</sup> However, Armstrong (2005) defining fundamentalism in generalized terms as a revolt against modern secular society, also emphasizes the non-violent nature of the most of the fundamentalists. She writes: "Only a tiny proportion of fundamentalists worldwide take part in

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<sup>88</sup> <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/EPRS/EPRS-briefing-551342-Religious-fundamentalism-and-radicalisation-FINAL.pdf>

acts of terror; the rest are simply struggling to live what they regard as a good religious life in a world that seems increasingly inimical to faith” (p. 1).

The field narratives reflected the fundamentalist views of respondents since they rested most of their arguments on the interpretation of the sacred texts and stories, which are more than thousand years old. However, it was interesting to know how “far” they can go in following their religious principles.

Discussion of religious principles could open a whole new field that would expand way beyond the scope of this thesis, therefore, I took those aspects of their ideologies that are under the scrutiny of the society. TJ members are generally criticized for their appearance that resembles the Arabic culture; I was interested how they coped with such attention from the public. Respondents from TJ demonstrated a more flexible approach when it came to the adaptation of their religious beliefs, except the woman respondent. Nurbek (TJ) and Azamat (TJ) shared that TJ leaders in the country encourage them to adopt the local traditional dresses that also cover parts that have to be closed according to Islam. For them, this was an important change since it would promote the local style clothing that do not contradict to the Islamic norms and at the same time would not irritate other people. As Azamat (TJ) said: “In the long run it is not how you look but how your heart looks. However, I do not mind wearing local clothing if it would make others happy”. For the women representative of TJ (Nurgul) the topic of hijab was rather sensitive, as she opposed changing her style to the local headscarf since she found it to be her human right to wear what she wanted. According to her, it was hypocrisy to say that in old times Kyrgyz women did not wear hijabs, if it was so then secularists should also mention that in old times Kyrgyz women did not go half naked as they do now. She could not understand why the rules should be applied selectively.

Perceived in the society as a group of fanatics who would like to restore the times of the Prophet and who oppose modern innovations, Salafis, however, did not make such impression. They mentioned that it was impossible to replicate the life of the Prophet and of his companions in the modern realities and that, they adopt modern technologies or anything else that would not destroy or challenge their aqyda (creed). For example, computers, cellphones and internet, although they did not exist during Prophet’s time, were an essential part of their life, since they facilitated their communication between each other and spread of knowledge. Sultan (Salafi) said that they have online groups on their telephones, where they communicate with like-minded members mainly from Russia, Caucasus and Saudi Arabia and receive educational lectures from the religious scholars from Saudi Arabia directly on their phones. For them, any practical and ideological innovations that had been brought into religion since the end of the

ear of “pious predecessors” (first three generations of Muslims) had to be carefully scrutinized by the Salafi scholars for the absence of serious contradictions to the core values of Islam. By following the example of the life of the “pious predecessors” Salafi respondents implied the virtues of predecessors like fear of God, of the Judgment day and the need to lead a righteous life without greed, anger and violence, but with denial of all those innovations that would hinder following of these virtues. The next section will mention why Salafis oppose dawah tours of TJ members and HuT’s fight for Caliphate.

HuT is considered as the most dangerous movement since they oppose the secular regime and would like to establish Islamic Caliphate. In our discussion, members continuously emphasized that the way to Caliphate must not be paved with violence. Eldar (HuT) highlighted that “violence is a crime against God”. However, their strict adherence to the model of the state existed during the Prophet and to the way it was built, certainly reflect the fundamentalist interpretation of the political aspect of Islam. According to Paramo-Ortega, “fundamentalism means an absolute truth claim, with no separation between church and state. Even more, it means no separation between politics and religion” (p. 17 cited in Schirrmacher, 2011, p. 21). Eldar (HuT) clearly stated that HuT is purely political party based on the religious principles. In his opinion, the Islamic understanding of religion lacks the separation between politics and Islam, and that the Prophet was a spiritual and the political leader of his commune. He highlighted that the ideology of HuT is universal since its source is Islam, which already contains all answers for peoples’ problems and regulates all aspects of a life of a person be it political, religious, social, juridical or any other.

As it was presented earlier in this chapter, respondents did not have a literalist interpretation of the Quran when it came to the understanding of jihad. I will try to present the variety of the positions based on the understanding of the respondents of the “most violent verse”, which is also a source for studies and speculations for many. The Quran (2:191) says: “And slay them wherever you find them, and drive them out of the places whence they drove you out, for persecution is worse than slaughter and fight them until fitnah (strife) is no more, and religion is for Allah”.

All of the respondents understood this verse in the figurative sense. Alia (Salafi) said to understand it in the context of the whole Quran and not consider it separately. Mirbek (HuT) shared with opinion, that this verse was actual during Prophet’s time and not applicable in modern conditions. From Azamat’s (Salafi) position verses had to be taken with great caution and deep religious knowledge and if a person lacks these qualities than he should rely on the scholars from their movements who devoted all their lives for the interpretation of the Quran

and hadiths. For him, the Quran was the greatest book since revealed from God, and by alternating of peaceful and violent verses it actually appeals for humans ability to reason and to common sense.

Juergensmeyer (2003) in his study of the connection between religion and violence comes to the conclusion that for the religious person the world is a battlefield or a cosmic war between forces of good and evil. By repeating the importance of worshiping the only God, by stressing the devil's attempts to misguide people and calling to take this life as a temporary home, Sultan's (Salafi) worldview in some way corresponded to Jurgensmeyer's arguments about the absolutistic ideologies shared by religious people and the idea of the cosmic war. However, Sultan (Salafi) projected the battlefield not onto the external surface, but inward. In his understanding, it is a constant fight between good and bad incorporated in human nature that determines the person's understanding of the Quran and hadiths. Based on whether the dark (Devil) or a light sight (God) of a person would win there would be a corresponding outward reaction and in this case a person would certainly see the Quran in black and white colors. As he said: "Again, like in a closed circuit, everything abuts to the notion of jihad as an internal struggle with your inner devil". Above-mentioned opinions based on different interpretations nevertheless did not contradict to the common message each of the informants tried to present – the opposition to unjust violence.

## **6.4 Attitudes towards others**

The following section will discuss the relationship of the informants to the secular state, society and "radical" Islamic movements like those studied in this work and to ISIS. As it was presented in chapter 4, the concept of peace in Islam is broad and incorporates the concept of jihad as a non-warfare and such fundamental values like patience, equality, brotherhood, recognition of humans rights and other values that promote peace. This concept in combination with the argument about the myth of religious violence developed within the field of CTS served as a framework for better understanding of the attitudes of the respondents to the people and structures around.

### **6.4.1 They do not represent Islam!**

According to Gulen (2001): "One should seek Islam through its own sources and its own true representatives throughout history, and not through the actions of a tiny minority that misrepresent it. The truth is that there is no harshness and bigotry in Islam. It is entirely a

religion of forgiveness and tolerance”.<sup>89</sup> The data of the Pew Research Center (2015) collected in 11 countries with significant Muslim populations, presents that respondents overwhelmingly voiced negative opinions of ISIS.<sup>90</sup>

To my question about their relation to ISIS, interviewees expressed deep concerns with actions of this group and by framing opinions about ISIS’s ideology in such words like “faulty”, “devilish” and “non-Islamic” made an impression of attempting to distance themselves from it. Almost every respondent cited the hadith that tells about the appearance of the group with black flags that would sow only evil and sufferings, and the second message of this hadith was that this group symbolizes the approaching end of days. Based on this meaning solution to the problem of ISIS was presented in two ways. Some respondents (two TJ members, one Salafi and two HuT members) referred to the Prophet, who said that if Muslim sees black flags, he should lay on the ground and close his eyes and ears, in their interpretation this meant that this group should be avoided. In addition, since this also meant a sign of the end of days, they had to work hard on improving own iman (faith), by spending more time in praying, being more observant of Islamic prescriptions and doing good to others. While in the opinion of the rest of the informants, also based on the other hadith of the Prophet, “these fake Muslims had to be killed by any who encounters them”. For them, ISIS members were not even humans, “devil’s henchmen” as one of the informants characterized and thus not worth living. Despite such drastic differences in methods of dealing with ISIS, informants were united in the idea that the “monstrous acts” of ISIS was not Islamic since a large number of innocent people, both Muslim and non-Muslims die or suffer from ISIS. Many conspiracy theories were stated by several informants, relating the appearance of ISIS to “the machinations of the West and hegemonic interest of the Israeli state”. While majority refrained from such ideas, since this group was already predicted and there was no matter who were behind them. In addition, it was mentioned that the absence of proofs would not allow the truth appear. According to Eldar (HuT):

When ISIS appeared last year, they also came with the black flags, but they are different in style than ours. Many people were waiting for our reaction because ISIS created the state we are also struggling for. [...] However, their methods violates all Islamic rules of the warfare, legal procedures of declaring a state to be Islamic are also disregarded. We made an official statement about the misconceptions of ISIS.<sup>91</sup> It is a militant group and their state is illegitimate, we do not recognize them and many far more radical

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<sup>89</sup> <http://www.gulenmovement.us/true-muslims-cannot-be-terrorists.html>

<sup>90</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/17/in-nations-with-significant-muslim-populations-much-disdain-for-isis/>

<sup>91</sup> I was sent the link about HuT official statement about ISIS <http://www.hizb.org.uk/current-affairs/media-statement-regarding-isis-declaration-in-iraq>

groups than ours turned back to them. They do not have own program, constitution, scholars, judges. It is a great chaos going there. Our position is clearly against ISIS.

#### **6.4.2 We know the right way**

Every informant mentioned the hadith, which says about the only saved group. According to the hadith, the Prophet Muhammad warned that Jews will split in 71 group, Christians in 72 and Muslims in 73; 72 of Muslim groups will be in hell and only one will enter paradise. When he was asked who is this group, he responded that those who follow him and his companions. Interpretation of this hadith was telling from the point of how members of the studied movements generally positioned themselves towards the representatives of other movements. Every informant highlighted that it is their group, which the Prophet implied, therefore, only their group has the correct ideology and ultimately will be saved. Surprisingly, the members had more critical approach to Muslims from other Islamic movements than to the traditional Muslims, the latter were identified as ignorant Muslims, thus subject for forgiveness for their misbehavior, but since members of other Islamic movements practiced and studied Islam, they were more responsible for their wrong path and harm they do to Islam. Most of the informants emphasized that they avoid contacts with members from other Islamic movements since it can have negative effects on their values or even undermine their faith. Generally, TJ members expressed similar opinions that Salafi and HuT are equally dangerous, because the first group is intolerant towards others and fanatically follows the radical ideas of Salafi scholars that call for the replication of the way of life of the first generations of Muslims, while the second is erroneous by the simple fact that it is a political organization. Salafis were also critical towards other movements, mainly referring to their superficial religious knowledge, incorrect interpretation of main dogmas and bringing innovations into religion. HuT were the most controversial in their opinions, which ranged from complete acceptance of the variety of Islamic movements to the accusation them in deteriorating Islam. Below, I will stop on the exemplary narratives from representatives of the movements. Azamat (TJ) mainly focused on the external features of the Salafis:

It is only Allah who judges, I am not saying they are evil (other movements), but I think they are not on the correct way. I often see Salafi members in the mosque, I try not to stand close to them, I feel the aggression outgoing from them, their eyes do not radiate nur (light). They pray in their own style and do not stay for khutbas (sermon) of Imams because they think that only they know the truth. [...] We accept that a man can be weak since iman (faith) is always up in down, but for them iman should always be strong, and no weakness in relation to Islam is forgiven. Therefore, Muslims who do not follow all Islamic



rules are not real Muslims for them. Our authoritative members say that we still should accept them as Muslim brothers but keep a distance from their ideology.

As for the relation to HuT, Nurbek (TJ) noted that the political matters only cause bigger problems and in the long run it is a mere race for power that draws away a person from his main purpose – serving God. He continued with his experience of communication with HuT members in prison:

Do you know that there are a lot of them (HuT members) in prison? [...] They tried to lure me, when you listen to them, you cannot but believe, so sensibly they talk, base arguments on hadiths. I am a simple man and do not have much knowledge, I could not argue with them I just knew they were wrong and tried hard not to lose this confidence.

Samat (Salafi) shared with his opinion about the fallacy of TJ's ideology. In his view, the dawah rulings of TJ did not exist during the times of the Prophet, therefore, it is a modern invention. According to his story, once he was a TJ member as “many start their religious life by becoming TJ member”, but he could not find answers for many questions, as TJ limit their scope of knowledge based on a few books that describe the life of the Prophet. He emphasized that TJ is not dangerous at all to the society but because of their low level of education they bring harm to religion as can erroneously interpret certain dogmas. He says: “They think that if they wear Islamic cloth, grow a beard and learn several Hadith they are true Muslims, but it is far from enough, we are (Muslims) obliged to transmit the trustworthy information purified from bidah (innovations)”.

HuT was perceived rather negatively; all Salafi members noted that in their ideology, speaking against the ruler even if he is oppressive is forbidden. Since, HuT only criticizes the state and head of the state, this, in the opinion of Salafi members could cause great fitnah (strife), in the form of religious wars, which is the worst form of violence in the context of modern times.

Mirbek (HuT) expressed an opinion that struggle for the Islamic Caliphate had to be an obligation for every Muslim and that idea of the Caliphate was not an exclusive invention of HuT. However, he mentioned that all Muslims are brothers and he does not oppose the diversity of movements, as long as they do not commit activities that contradict to Islam. He emphasized that he had several close friends from TJ, whom he respects much for the “purity of their visions and beauty of their hearts” and he noted that they made a rule not to talk about politics.

According to Kanat (HuT) TJ and Salafi movements did not represent a danger neither for the society nor for other religious movements. However, for him, these movements were weak since they accept the present reality, where the ideology of the kufar (non-believers) dominated. He questioned how it was possible to live in the non-Islamic state and try to be a real Muslim. He mentioned that whenever he meets with them, they try to convert him to their ideology; therefore, he limited any contacts with them and sometimes challenges their ideologies in the online forums.

However, I could not identify any answer from the respondents that would suggest any radical or hostile attitude towards members of Islamic movements, except the suggestions to either teach them about “true” Islam if possible or keep ideological distance, in order to save own faith.

#### **6.4.3 Attitudes towards the secular society**

Most of the respondents expressed disappointment with the representations of Islam in the world, and found it not surprising that society was critical of them. Except two HuT members, others did not find such moods existing in the society as a critical issue for them, since they were also part of this society. Azamat (TJ) and Marat (Salafi) shared close opinions, that not long ago they were also non-religious and now when they were on the other side of the line they could easily see that non-religious people would never understand them, therefore, there was no point of arguing or proving something to these people. As far as I could judge, the concept of tolerance was an essential part of the ideology of TJ. Nurbek (TJ) expressed that such situation in the society is the test for the pious Muslims from the God, therefore Muslims should not fall into extremes and accept with tolerance whatever comes. Nurbek shared with his stories from the dawah tours:

You know, how hard it is to talk with non-religious people about Islam? During dawah, sometimes, people even spit on my face, or close the door before your nose before you even start to talk. I had an authority when I was in prison. I threatened people to accept Islam, until I understood that it does not work in this way. They were afraid of me but not of God. [...] TJ teaches tolerance, the Prophet Muhammad won the world through tolerance. If before somebody would spit on me I would probably kill him, but now I learnt to accept it with a smile on my face.

Marat (Salafi) and Alia (Salafi) mentioned that they work in the secular environment, have many relatives and friends who were traditional Muslims, in this regard it was expressed that such conditions should be accepted as a matter of fact. Salafi members often called non-Salafi

Muslims as jahils (ignorant Muslims), those who were still Muslims even if they do not observe any practices and they had to be accepted as brothers in faith, since God could any time put jahils on the right path. It was also mentioned that traditional Muslims “are like children, who are not aware of own actions” and “misguided by the worldly matters”. Generally, Salafi members referred to the religion as a private matter of each person and appeared to be more “closed” in communications with others on religious topics. Samat (Salafi) emphasized that he tries to avoid speaking about Islam and his ideology with others, Marat (Salafi) said that he usually discusses religious matters when asked and Alia (Salafi) shared that she finds it her duty to warn people about wrong doings but only if she would sees that the other person would understand her.

TJ members on the contrary, were more inclined towards “spreading of Islam among traditional Muslims” and highlighted that TJ members are “the hard working laborers of Islam” as they care about the spiritual condition of other Muslims who “gone astray”.

Several HuT members noted that the society is becoming more exposed to the western ideology and more ignorant about own traditions and religion. For them, only Islamic state and the justice system of the sharia could stop the present “decay of the society, where the principles of the morality do not exist anymore”. However, it was underlined that any forceful methods like punishment for drinking alcohol, apostasy, corruption etc. would be allowed only after appearance of the Islamic state. Eldar (HuT) noted that HuT does not say that Islam means peace, but it rather calls Islam as a true religion based on the principles of justice where punishments depending on the crime are permissible like in any modern states with the secular governments.

#### **6.4.4 Attitudes towards the state**

The question about respondents’ views about the state aroused interesting comments. All of the TJ members underlined that politics was a prohibited topic to discuss, but as one of them jokingly noted that they are a “normal” human beings as well, it appeared that they were not absolutely abstracted from the political life and were aware of the general political trends and one of them even voted during presidential elections. Azamat (TJ) told that during dawah tours the leaders of the groups strictly observe that the political matters are not discussed and during religious teachings dawaatchys are suggested to “close their mouths with hands” if they wanted to speak about politics. However, he thought that political topics were impossible to avoid in Kyrgyzstan since it is the “main topic of discussions everywhere in the country”. All of the TJ members were, nevertheless positive or neutral in the assessment of the current state’s activities

by saying that “Kyrgyzstan is not tyrannical like neighboring countries”, that “the government does not force women to take off hijab and shave off beards like in other places” and that “whatever the state was, strong faith can overcome any challenges”.

The Salafi members were united in the position that any revolt against the state was not acceptable in their ideology since it causes fitnah (strife). As an example, several Salafi members mentioned two state revolutions, which, according to them, brought only more problems to the country and took many innocent lives. In their views, fitnah was one of the greatest sins, because going against the governor is equal to betrayal of Islam, even if the governor is non-religious or non-Muslim. Marat (Salafi) noted that those Salafis whom he knows from the country all make duas (prayers) for the stability in the country and for the President, so that he becomes a “good Muslim and rule the country wisely”. He expressed with humor that if the President were aware that the group, so feared in the society was actually the most devoted supporters of him, what the President would say.

Tibo (2016) contributes to the main points of the CTS, about the myth of religious violence, and the power relations in creation of the attitudes towards religion, by arguing that Central Asian states continue the aggressive antireligious policy of the Soviet Union.<sup>92</sup> She writes that the states in Central Asia, that do not tolerate any political opposition, see Islam as a mobilization force, and in turn, religious people, who are not necessarily involved in politics through their life choices, definitely show the failure of the secular ideology of the states. Galdini (2015) argues, that given the sensitivity of the topic of religious violence and its potential in the country, people are generally left with the official position of the government that blankly condemns anything that does not conform to the traditional version of Islam or can question the politics of the government.

HuT members expressed critical and negative attitudes towards the politics of the state, which was in their view “against own people”, “corrupted”, “anti-Islamic” and “influenced by the interests of the kufar countries”. Informants had deep grievances about the actions of the state against HuT members. In their opinion, the state’s excessive measures were due to the fear of any power that would challenge its position, therefore HuT members are ruthlessly persecuted, both women and men. According to Eldar’s explanation, which also reflected main points of the other HuT respondents:

Yes, we claim a change of government, but this change does not always come through violence. Even, the history of your country had an episode of the non-violent revolution, when Akaev (former President)

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<sup>92</sup> <http://caa-network.org/archives/6934>

left his position without resistance. Georgia, Ukraine, USSR and some other countries can be examples of non-violent change of the system, so it is possible. [...] We are the political party and like any party have own program of development of the country. Before changing something, one has to offer alternatives; our program offers an alternative vision of the state. The Arab spring happened spontaneously, and yes, they overthrew corrupted regimes but those who did it, did not have alternatives for the existing situation there and after a short period, these countries are in even worse crisis. [...] Islam is a complete religion that regulates all aspects of life. Our program based on the Islamic principles has concepts of economic, social, political and juridical development. For us, state is the people and we are not claiming a power to govern people, we offer people our ideas and principles so that they choose us themselves. We distribute our program among the population and try to interest more people so that eventually majority of population would support us. We do not have an armed wing, on the contrary, we appeal to the state army, to those who have power in the state to help us change the system without bloodshed. This is the method of the Prophet Muhammad that we follow.

## **6.5 Summary**

This chapter focused on the opinions of the main group of informants, about the concept of violence or jihad in their ideologies and attitudes towards the state, society and other Islamic movements. Opinions about considering jihad in a historical context, when religious wars were carried out according to the historical realities of the times of the Prophet Muhammad, were voiced by the informants. It was understood that the violent environment of the Prophet's time made violence unavoidable; however, a careful reasoning was required in the modern realities. According to the majority of responses, for Muslims, regardless of their ideological differences the right for self-defense was a permission given from God, therefore, violence when own life, family and assets are on stake, was normal to the ideologies of the studies movements. However, the informants emphasized the other, "peaceful" side of jihad. Such jihad is turned inward, when a person should fight with his ego and passions, so that he can become stronger person and more submissive to God. Being fundamentalists, since their life was regulated by the religious dogmas informants' responses did not characterize them as violent or their ideologies as absurd or dangerous. When it came to the relation to the secular society, state, "radical" Islamic movements and ISIS, respondents expressed mixed reactions ranging from the need of offensive violence towards ISIS to the tolerance of the state, other people or Islamic movements. Yet, such reactions were framed as a necessity for keeping peace and stability. Although, HuT members were critical about the state policy, their tolerance was based on the example of the peaceful resistance of the Prophet.

## **Chapter 7. Summary and concluding remarks**

This thesis has attempted to answer the question of how ideologies of “radical” Islamic movements in Kyrgyzstan like TJ, Salafi and HuT explain violence in the name of religion. Through this research question, the study has tried to have a broader picture on the current religious situation characterized by the tense relationships between religious and non-religious parts of the population and understand the violence potential of the above-mentioned Islamic movements. The study has been based on 17 qualitative semi-structured interviews with two groups of informants – primary and second group. Ten informants were in the primary group and represented TJ, Salafi and HuT movements. Seven informants, representing the experts in religious issues like Imams, government officials and scholars made the second group of informants.

The thesis was organized in seven chapters. The introduction part of the chapter outlined the general picture of the religious situation existing today in Kyrgyzstan. It was discussed that the rising religiosity of the citizens of Kyrgyzstan, who usually become followers of the various Islamic movements evoke predominantly negative or cautious attitude among secular part of the society and the state, due to the alleged violence potential of the members of the Islamic movements. Therefore, the problem statement part of the introduction chapter highlighted the main aim of the study – understanding the concept of violence in the ideologies of the members of “radical” Islamic movements. The second chapter develops the information presented in the first chapter by providing a more nuanced focus on the peculiarities of the Islamization process, religious situation in Kyrgyzstan within its historical context and characteristics of the studied Islamic movements. The history of Islamization in Kyrgyzstan was conditionally divided into three periods: pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet periods. The pre-Soviet period covers a large historical period starting from the Silk Road period era when the Arab merchants introduced Islam to the Kyrgyz nomadic tribes almost a millennium ago. The pre-Islamic heathen beliefs and practices such as animism, shamanism and worshiping of the ancestors were partly fused and incorporated together with the Islamic practices like the Sufi ideology (Heyat, 2004). The second important period covers that part of the history when the country was a part of the Soviet Union. The Soviet ideology of atheism significantly affected the religious situation in the country, when religious practices were severely restricted for almost 70 years. The third period illustrated the independence period or post-Soviet times when the liberal religious policy facilitated unobstructed arrival of various religious movements, predominantly Islamic ones due to the large Muslim population living in Kyrgyzstan.

However, the large-scale process of Islamization stimulated by the foreign missionary funding, the aspirations of people to fill the spiritual vacuum accumulated during the Soviet period created a so-called “discourse on danger” of Islamic movements. To understand such discourse, the chapter attempted to explain what radicalization in the Kyrgyz context is and present differences between secular or traditional Muslims and non-traditional Muslims. The chapter also presented a general overview of the TJ, Salafi and HuT movements and highlighted their main aims and characteristics.

The Methodological Chapter focused on data collection method as well as fieldwork experiences and reflections. The qualitative method in the form of the semi-structured interviews was chosen as a most appropriate one for the understanding of the spiritual world of the informants. Since I considered my insider/outsider position as the main challenge during the fieldwork, the methodological chapter had a particular focus on this aspect of the fieldwork as well.

Furthermore, the next chapter four discussed the conceptual framework of the thesis. This framework was used to understand and analyze the collected data in the data presentation and analysis chapters. The conceptual framework presented by concepts like jihad, peace, fundamentalism and arguments from the CTS field, contributed to the understanding of the ideologies of the Islamic movements, as well as helped to indicate respondents’ attitudes to the people and structures around.

Chapters five and six were devoted to the analysis of the data collected during the fieldwork and presented the perspectives of the group of experts (chapter 5) and of the main group of informants (chapter 6).

Finally, this seventh chapter summarizes the findings of the study, based on the contributions from each of the chapters, but with special attention to the findings from the analysis chapters.

## **Findings**

According to responses of the members of the “radical” Islamic movements, religion was an integral part of their life since every actions they took were regulated by the religious norms or at least respondents attempted to follow these norms. Islam being a life guideline shaped the worldviews of the respondents about a concept of violence as well. Despite their different membership statuses, most of the respondents mentioned similar opinions about jihad and at least several interpretation of this concept. This was an interesting finding, as I set off to the

fieldwork with the expectation that movements would have a unique, own position towards this concept. As a result, analysis of their answers did not allow me to attribute explanations on jihad to the particular movement and all of the respondents from the main group appeared to me as a single group of pious Muslims, not significantly different in their opinions. A variety of interpretations found their sources in the religious texts like the Quran and stories from the life of the Prophet Muhammad, who was considered by many as a role model. This already makes the informants fundamentalists in some sense, since the concept of fundamentalism encompasses the idea of strict follow of the religious texts and practices. It was argued that jihad had to be considered within the historical context, when the Muslims did not have other options rather than to fight for the “true religion” and the right path, however, informants rejected the idea of replication of the violence in the name of religion in the modern context. The other interpretation that was central to the most of the respondents’ opinion was the defensive nature of jihad and arguments were based on the example of the life of the Prophet, when he in practice demonstrated the right for the self-defense in the case of direct aggression. It was also, emphasized that even in the case of wars strict observations of norms of the warfare in Islam had to be followed when it was forbidden to take lives of women, children and of the old people.

Other aspects of their ideologies, for the matter of possible inclination towards violence, were considered through the attitudes of the respondents to other members of Islamic movements, IS, state and the society. The actions of IS were unequivocally condemned by all respondents and Muslimness of this group was impugned as well. Members of TJ and Salafi appeared to be either supportive of the state or neutral to state’s activities while HuT members expressed criticism and mentioned that the struggle for the Islamic state they wish to live in is possible through the non-violent method of state building performed by the Prophet. Most of the respondents were convinced that only their group is on the right track, therefore, all other Islamic movements bring more harm to the religion since they interpret religion erroneously. The informants expressed fears similar to those existing in the society in relation to the activities of other Islamic movements, which allow building an argument that there is a low level of interactions between Islamic movements and sharp ideological split, despite the similar religion. Secular Muslims deserved less criticism than the Muslims from “radical” Islamic movements, since secular Muslims were characterized as “people lost on their way” and as ignorant Muslims, therefore, had to be accepted with tolerance and if possible guided into true Islam.



Furthermore, the analysis of the responses of the informants from the second group displayed various attitudes to the ideologies and activities of the Islamic movements in the country. For some experts these movements did not represent a serious threat since the source of their religious inspiration – Islam is non-violent in nature. Yet, for other informants the Islamic movements were potentially dangerous due to the influence of some external forces, interested in the destabilization of the situation in the country and low religious knowledge among the followers of the movements. A low level of religious education was highlighted by all of the informants from the second group and was seen as a potential problem for the further development of the religious situation in the country.

My general conclusion is that those fears existing in the society about the threats posed by the “radical” ideologies of the Islamic movements did not find evidence in the opinions of the informants from the main group. Strong condemnation of unjustified violence, generally tolerant attitudes to the secular society and HuT’s wish to live in the not forcibly built Islamic state give an indication that if these ideologies are really strictly followed by the informants than the possibility of violence could be excluded. However, the results obtained through qualitative method were certainly restricted by the small number of the informants that did not allow generalization to the larger population. In addition, the risk of credibility of the collected data exists as well since the sensitive nature of the topic of the connection between Islam and violence and anxious moods in the society could influence the answers of the respondents and perhaps made them omit certain data in a favor of representation of their ideologies as peaceful ones. Consequently, this study suggests that integration of “other” Muslims and impartial coverage of the issue of the ideological diversity existing in the country today should be addressed in order to avoid the extremes of condemnation of all Islamic movements in radicalization disregarding the variety of their distinct characteristics. On the background of the protracted transition period and structural problems, it would be strategically significant to manage the situation of ideological polarization between people who identify themselves as Muslims but belonging to two alien camps of traditional and non-traditional Muslims.

In my opinion, the secondary findings, which were based on my personal observations of respondents’ behavior and comprehension of their religious language and symbols, are interesting to be briefly presented as well. I had an impression that informants strongly associated themselves with their movements. Each respondent was satisfied or happy to be a member of the movement as their “soul searching” or endeavors to change a way of life found answers in the ideas of the movement they belonged to. Also, many referring to God’s will had been made to demonstrate that their membership was guided by God and many respondents

distinguished themselves from the rest of traditional Muslims in a way that they found themselves blessed to comprehend the sacred topics and not be pseudo-Muslims. For me this made an impression that that refuge they found in religion, interpreted through the movement's ideology was a reaction to the changing environment and by being fundamentalist in many aspects, which however did not engage violence at least offensive one, they were trying to follow and preserve own "culture". By having different positions on certain aspects of religion, like for example, serious disputes about the political matters (TJ's and Salafi's non-encouragement of political struggle) or on matters of the degree of religious knowledge needed to be a "true Muslim" (Salafis' criticism of TJ about knowledge) they were however strongly opposing violence both motivated by religious and non-religious matters. If I had to characterize informants of the movements in a few words I would say that TJ members mainly associated with tolerance of whatever burden one is sent, Salafis with the importance of getting/finding/searching authentic religious knowledge and HuT with justice in all aspects of life, that has to be attained only through Islam and Sharia.

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