

TAJIKISTAN: THE CHANGING INSURGENT THREATS

Asia Report N°205 – 24 May 2011

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TAJIKISTAN: THE CHANGING INSURGENT THREATS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Tajikistan, by most measures Central Asia's poorest and most vulnerable state, is now facing yet another major problem: the growing security threat from both local and external insurgencies. After his security forces failed to bring warlords and a small group of young insurgents to heel in the eastern region of Rasht in 2010-2011, President Emomali Rakhmon did a deal to bring a temporary peace to the area. But he may soon face a tougher challenge from the resurgent Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a group with a vision of an Islamist caliphate that is fighting in Afghanistan alongside the Taliban.

That conflict is moving closer to the 1,400km Afghan-Tajik border. Many anti-government guerrillas operating in northern Afghanistan are of Central Asian origin and are largely affiliated with the IMU, which seems to be focusing on its fight against the government in Kabul but may at some stage turn its attention northwards. Tajikistan has almost no capacity to tackle a dedicated insurgent force; its efforts to quell problems in Rasht have left its only well-trained counter-insurgency unit with just over 30 fighters.

A decade of increased international attention and aid has failed to make Tajikistan more secure or prosperous. A kleptocracy centred on the presidential family has taken much of the money from assistance and aluminium. Popular discontent over poverty and failing services has been kept in check by repression and an exodus of the dissatisfied as migrant workers. All institutions have been hollowed out, leaving a state with no resilience to cope with natural disasters, economic crises or political shocks.

A new generation of guerrillas is emerging, both within Tajikistan and in the IMU. They are mostly men in their twenties with little memory of the Tajik civil war of 1992-1997. This development has punctured two comfortable assumptions: that the IMU was a forlorn rump of ageing jihadists and that Tajiks were too scarred by the memory of the brutal civil war to turn on the regime. The latter has long been central to the analyses of both the Tajik leadership and many foreign governments.

The secular, Soviet-trained leadership that emerged from the civil war now finds itself dealing with a society in-

creasingly drawn to observant Islam. The regime's response to this is as inept as its efforts to bring Rasht to heel. Tajiks studying in foreign Islamic institutions have been called home; the government is trying to control the content of Friday sermons and prevent young people from visiting mosques; it has also dismissed some clerics. Officials allege that the main opposition party, the Islamic Renaissance Party, is becoming increasingly radicalised. Clumsy policies may make this a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Jihadist groups, too, are paying more attention to Tajikistan. Limited infiltration of armed guerrillas from Afghanistan has been taking place for several years. The numbers seem relatively small and their intent unknown. Many pass through to other countries – notably Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Some, however, are probably probing for government vulnerabilities. A small number of fighters from the North Caucasus have also been active in Tajikistan in recent years. Radicalisation by osmosis is growing: Tajikistan is gradually becoming part of the virtual jihad. Islamist websites are paying increasing attention to events in the country. Islamic militants in Tajikistan are adopting tactics already well known in other jihadist struggles, notably in the North Caucasus. In September 2010 the country witnessed what was described as its first suicide bombing. And while most military attention is focused on Rasht, the northern border area of Isfara, not far from Khujand, is developing the reputation of a safe haven for armed militants.

Billions of dollars of drugs pass through Tajikistan en route to Russia and China every year. There is a strong suspicion within the international community that senior members of the ruling elite are protecting the transit of narcotics from Afghanistan. High-level protection is almost certainly undermining international organisations' attempts to control the border with Afghanistan – efforts that officials involved admit have had very little effect. At a time of growing menace from Afghanistan, the first line of defence is being kept artificially weak.

With the IMU engaged, for now, in Afghanistan, it would be advisable to use whatever breathing space is available to re-evaluate security and aid policies. China, a silent but crucial player in the region with vital security interests, could usefully be drawn into joint consultations, along

with the U.S., Russia and others, on measures to assess the security problems and possible responses. Bilateral and multilateral donors should examine the utility of providing assistance to a regime that cannot prevent a very significant proportion being lost to corruption. Conditionality should be adopted as the norm. The Tajik government should be put on notice that a failure to address support for the narcotics trade within its own elite will seriously damage its credibility and outside support.

President Rakhmon denies that the North African scenario of popular unrest and revolt could happen in Tajikistan; despite the different circumstances, such confidence is questionable. Tajikistan is so vulnerable that a small, localised problem could quickly spiral into a threat to the regime's existence. The speed with which the popular mood can move from passivity to anger was demonstrated not just in the Middle East, but much closer to home, in Kyrgyzstan, in April 2010. Tajikistan is not immune.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Governments of Russia, China and the U.S.:

1. Institute joint consultations with a view to assessing the risks to the Afghan-Tajikistan border, and Afghanistan, from Afghanistan-based insurgent groups of Central Asian origin or interest. Share information and intelligence on the strength, strategic intentions and capabilities of Islamist insurgent groups like IMU. Discuss joint measures to reinforce border security and inhibit the trans-shipment of narcotics.

To the U.S., Other Members of the International Coalition in Afghanistan and Major Donors:

2. Raise explicitly and regularly with the president of Tajikistan and other senior leaders the concerns of the international community that senior members of the leadership are benefiting from narcotics smuggling. Urge the government to take energetic measures to investigate and punish any senior officials found to be active in the trade and warn it of the potential repercussions of failing to take such steps – notably reduction or termination of aid.

To the International Community and Donors in Tajikistan:

3. Reconfigure the strategy and philosophy of aid. Make conditionality the norm to reward reform and new approaches and penalise corruption or incompetence. Maintain a flexible aid fund, to be disbursed according to performance. In developing this policy, pay particular attention to developing well-coordinated positions

to avoid duplication; investing in long-term institution and capacity-building; and avoiding short-term superficial responses (eg, investing in new anti-corruption courts, rather than the existing judiciary) or focusing overly on security measures. Investing now in developing aid staff expertise in Tajikistan and Central Asia would pay significant dividends.

To the Government of Tajikistan:

4. Engage in open and public dialogue with all Islamist groups that explicitly repudiate the use of violence to achieve their ends. Repeal laws banning such organisations and encourage their free participation in all forms of political and social life.

Bishkek/Brussels, 24 May 2011

TAJIKISTAN: THE CHANGING INSURGENT THREATS

I. INTRODUCTION

Efforts to understand most insurgencies are bedevilled by imponderables and huge gaps in basic information.¹ In Tajikistan, absence of information is the norm. A feckless and incompetent government, bemused by the sudden eruption of violence in the eastern part of the country and ominous developments in the north, yet desperate to keep the president happy, seems to make up information as it goes along. It also does its best to hamper reporting by its own media. The resulting distortions often work against their authors. In 2009 the government claimed a victory where there was none. In 2010, when it urgently requested assistance from a major donor for security training, the request was met with scepticism and ultimately rejected.

No one seems to have a clear picture of the challenges facing the country. “My intelligence officers lie to me”, said a mid-level security official. “The president’s people lie to him. I don’t think anyone knows what is really going on here”.²

Alongside propaganda and self-serving accounts come conspiracy theories. Government officials and opposition leaders, and many analysts as well, slot new information into their ready-made framework of “foreign hands” guiding events, trying to bend Tajikistan to their will. The most frequently cited hands belong to Uzbekistan or Russia. Thus senior security officials note that Islamic extremists flew in from Russia to join a revolt in 2009, without being challenged by Russian border officials as they left; some – both government and opposition figures – also assert that Mullo Abdullo, an emblematic player in the events between 2009 and 2011, was flown into Tajikistan’s Garm region in 2009 by a Russian helicopter.

Other officials assert that the Taliban’s jihadist ally, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), is controlled by Uzbek President Islam Karimov. Uzbekistan and Russia

would indeed like to see a more pliable Tajikistan. Assertions that they are running the IMU or air dropping guerrillas, however, need more evidence than is currently available. Across the border in Afghanistan, senior officials have their own conspiracy theories. When the IMU moved from Pakistan to northern Afghanistan some two years ago, officials say, they did so with Pakistani assistance, coordinated by the country’s military intelligence. The aim, they believe, was to open another front against allied forces, reducing pressure on the Taliban in the south, and to deter the U.S. from re-orienting too much of its highly profitably supply operations from Pakistan to Central Asia.³

Western governments also suffer from a serious lack of information. Most long ago diverted much of their regional intelligence and analytical expertise to Afghanistan. This may explain the surprisingly swift change in assessment of the IMU. A few years ago it was described as a pale shadow of its old fighting force, of little threat to anyone other than villagers of Pakistan’s north west. Now most ballpark estimates put its fighting force in the low thousands. These seem not much more than guesses, however, and little is known about the IMU’s organisation or aims.

The dearth of analytical data on Tajikistan highlights another form of collateral damage wrought by the war in Afghanistan. Human analytical and information resources are overstretched; other resources seem in desperately short supply. There is strong likelihood that the major powers which could soon be called upon to evaluate long-term security risks in Central Asia lack even the basic intelligence data needed to assemble a coherent picture of the situation. Now Western intelligence communities are scrambling to make sense of what is happening in remote and baffling places like Tajikistan, with their ever shifting skeins of loyalties and interests.

Research for this report was carried out in Tajikistan, the U.S., Germany, Belgium, Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan.

¹For previous Crisis Groups Asia Reports, see N°30, *Tajikistan: An Uncertain Peace*, 24 December 2001; N°162, *Tajikistan: On the Road to Failure*, 12 February 2009; and N°201, *Central Asia: Decay and Decline*, 3 February 2011.

²Crisis Group interview, government official, Dushanbe, April 2011.

³Crisis Group interview, Kabul, 11 October 2010.

II. RASHT: THE FOCUS OF CONCERN

Events in the eastern region of Rasht since 2008 encapsulate both the deteriorating security situation in Tajikistan and the government's unsuccessful response. In 2008 an effort to remove one of the last former United Tajik Opposition (UTO) commanders from a position of authority backfired. In 2009 the government was severely stretched by a limited incursion from Afghanistan. In 2010 it deployed much of its armed forces in the east, took significant casualties and ended up by amnestying and hiring those it had accused of terrorism. Using its newly amnestied allies in 2011, it finally neutralised the commander it had been trying to kill in 2009. This further strengthened a local warlord who is deeply averse to government involvement in Rasht and in turn is deeply disliked by the military, police and security structures – the so-called power bloc. The chances that President Rakhmon could replicate this deal anywhere else in the country are low. And the chances that the deal will unravel are quite high.

A. BACKGROUND

In its broadest definition, Rasht borders on Afghanistan to the south, the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region to the east and Kyrgyzstan to the north. This makes it highly attractive terrain for any guerrilla organisation. Until 1955, when it was broken up into districts, it was a single administrative region known as the Garm Viloyat. The name Garm is now used only for the main settlement of Rasht district. Inhabitants of the whole region, however, feel a cultural and historical affinity. As Tajikistan's pre-eminent historian, a Garm native, puts it: "This mountainous region is connected to Mastchoh, Ferghana Valley, Alai, Hisar, Badakhshan, Afghanistan We tend to see Garm-Tavildara-Darvaz as one region".⁴

In the early days of Soviet power, Basmachi rebels, a religiously conservative guerrilla movement ferociously opposed to both secular Soviet power and Islamic modernisers (*jadid*), operated in the region. Soviet military history was in fact made in Garm in April 1929, when the Red Army mounted its first airborne assault to repel a Basmachi cross-border raid from Afghanistan.⁵ During the 1992-1997 civil war, the region was the main military and political stronghold of the UTO, a coalition consist-

ing largely of Islamic activists, but also Westernising reformists, engaged in a costly struggle against remnants of the Soviet-era leadership led by Emomali Rakhmon.

A foreign volunteer who played a prominent role in the fighting, Juma Namangani – the *nom de guerre* of Jumbay Khojiev, a Soviet veteran of the Afghan war – would later command the military wing of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the jihadist structure that still plays a central role in any discussion of Central Asian insurgency. Under a power-sharing agreement at the end of the civil war, UTO figures were allocated 30 per cent of military and political positions in the new government, and the UTO itself was subsequently dissolved. Military figures from Rasht were well represented at all levels and were to become significant players in the years to come.

A junior UTO commander, Mirzokhuja Akhmadov, the one-time foreman of a road-building team, was made a colonel and head of the local department of the anti-organised crime directorate (UBOP), a unit that in most former Soviet countries is viewed as an elite police organisation. Another local commander, Shokh Iskandarov, from Khoit in Rasht district, became a colonel in the border guards, in charge of a stretch of the Tajik-Kyrgyz border. A much more senior UTO commander, Mirzo Ziyoyev, went to Dushanbe as emergency situations minister, leading a paramilitary disaster relief organisation that quickly grew in size and weaponry. A local commander who rejected the peace agreement, Abdullo Rakhimov, alias Mullo Abdullo, retreated to Afghanistan and found refuge with the Taliban.⁶

In the post-war years, President Rakhmon gradually squeezed most UTO figures out of their government positions. Ziyoyev was one of the last to go, replaced in late 2006. Iskandarov reportedly lost his position the next year. Ziyoyev returned to Tavildara, the valley just south of Rasht, where he continued to be an influential unofficial leader. Akhmadov, however, held on to his position, and contrived to keep the central government at arm's length. A Western ambassador recalled that in 2008, any senior government official planning to visit Rasht had to clear the size of his delegation with Akhmadov. "The central government is not in charge in the region", the ambassador added.⁷

⁴ Crisis Group interview, Professor Kamoludin Abdullaev, 24 April 2011.

⁵ Kamoludin Abdullaev, *От Синьцзяна до Хорасана [From Xinjiang to Khorasan]* (Dushanbe, 2009), pp. 412-413. The Basmachi are sometimes compared to the Taliban, and the Garm raid had an eerily modern sound to it. Among those executed by the raiders were three young women who had adopted Western dress and were planning to go to school.

⁶ A former comrade in arms, released from prison after a lengthy term in March 2011, recalled that Abdullo did not trust the government to keep its word on power sharing. "Мулло Абдулло не верил в настоящий мир" ["Mullo Abdullo did not believe in a real peace"], 22 March 2011, at www.ozodi.org/content/interview_eshoni_daroz/2345956.html.

⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior Western diplomat, Dushanbe, 19 September 2008. Crisis Group Report, *Tajikistan: On The Road to Failure*, op. cit., fn. 42.

B. 2008: THE FIRST CONFRONTATION

On 2 February 2008 a column of paramilitary police (OMON) led by the unit's national commander, Colonel Oleg Zakharchenko, arrived in Rasht's main settlement, Garm, and engaged in a firefight with Akhmadov's small but heavily armed bodyguard. Zakharchenko was killed.⁸ Akhmadov said at the time that the attack was a provocation mounted by the then-interior minister, Makhmadnazar Salikhov.⁹ Many other observers viewed it as an unsuccessful attempt by the president to remove one of the last UTO veterans with any regional influence. In a subsequent interview, Akhmadov claimed that Rakhmon had called him soon after the shooting to say he had known nothing of the attack.¹⁰ In the murky world of presidential palace politics, the top leadership often plays key figures off against each other, with dramatic consequences.

More significant in retrospect were Akhmadov's comments in the interview about the general situation in the region, and in particular his hostility to any interference by the central government. He warned that if government forces tried to come for him again, they would be "received appropriately". He stated that his half dozen or so bodyguards were ex-UTO local commanders, who could each quickly mobilise 50 to 60 fighters if needed. Over 100 former UTO fighters had come to the area, asking him for protection, he said, noting in an aside that at the time seemed mysterious, that paths to and from Afghanistan were open.¹¹

Akhmadov was not dismissed after the firefight, despite a reportedly furious response from senior government officials. One Rakhmon lieutenant unsuccessfully demanded airstrikes against him, a senior diplomat recalled.¹² In October 2008 Rakhmon met Akhmadov during a visit to Garm. In return for a presidential pardon for himself and his followers, Akhmadov announced he had turned in his weapons, resigned from his police post, and taken up farming. It was widely believed at the time that he had been offered

land and money to stand down. Akhmadov obliquely confirmed this in an interview two years later.¹³

The incident continues to reverberate throughout Tajik politics and has on several occasions given rise to murmurs of unhappiness from top members of the security establishment – a rare phenomenon, given the ruthless discipline Rakhmon imposes on his ministers. Senior officials in the power ministries were deeply unhappy at the October 2008 pardon and made their feelings clear. For example, the prosecutor general declared that though the investigation into the Zakharchenko case had been suspended, "his killers will sooner or later be punished".¹⁴ Despite his ostensible return to private life, Akhmadov, as well as other former local UTO commanders, remained figures of considerable authority in Rasht.

C. 2009: THE RETURN OF MULLO ABDULLO

Although accounts of the Rasht and Tavildara operations of May-July 2009 are even more tangled than usual, certain themes are clear. Everything started with an alleged incursion into the region by Afghan-based guerrillas led by Mullo Abdullo, the former UTO commander who had rejected the 1997 peace agreement. His fighters were at various times described by the government as IMU members or IMU-affiliated. The government military operation no sooner started, however, than it abruptly shifted its target from Mullo Abdullo to the last remaining senior UTO commander in Rasht, General Mirzo Ziyoyev. The operation ended with Ziyoyev dead, and no convincing explanation of what happened either to Mullo Abdullo or his multinational band. Much of the international community, meanwhile, seemed content to accept the government's victory claims.

In the second part of May 2009, word spread that Mullo Abdullo had returned to Tajikistan from Afghanistan with 100 fighters and was being joined by more men as he travelled around Rasht. Military operations were launched in the area under the cover of an anti-narcotics sweep, Operation Poppy. (The area is not known for its poppy

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Crisis Group interview, Mirzokhuja Akhmadov, Garm, 24 July 2008. Parts were cited in *ibid.* In June 2009, Salikhov, recently fired from the interior ministry, allegedly shot himself as police came to arrest him for abuse of office and other charges. A well-informed diplomat, reflecting a widespread opinion within the political elite, commented that Salikhov's real crime had been to suggest the president needed a deputy. Crisis Group interview, April 2011.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Mirzokhuja Akhmadov, Garm, 24 July 2008.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Crisis Group interview, former ambassador stationed in Dushanbe during events described, April 2011.

¹³ In a January 2011 interview with a Tajik publication, Akhmadov mentioned in passing a government promise of land in return for his retirement from the police service. "М. Ахмадов: Мы достанем их и в правительстве" ["We will get to them, even in the government"], *Asia Plus*, 12 January 2011, <http://news.tj/ru/newspaper/article/m-akhmadov-my-dostanem-ikh-i-v-pravitelstve>.

¹⁴ "Таджикистан: Полевой командир ОТО М.Ахмадов угрожал властям вновь взяться за оружие" ["UTO field commander M. Akhmadov threatens once again to take up arms"], *Fergana.ru* news service, 27 July 2010, www.fergananews.com/news.php?id=152650.

production.¹⁵) Reinforcements were brought in from northern Tajikistan and Dushanbe, including interior ministry and state security special forces.¹⁶ An international observer remarked that the government seemed to have “stripped” the country of military forces to handle the incursion. Another noted that government security structures were at “full stretch”.¹⁷

Many observers doubted that Mullo Abdullo actually existed. Some maintained he was too old and ill to lead military operations. One of the most senior former UTO leaders remarked that Abdullo had been addicted for so many years to “calming substances”, as he put it, that he was barely functional.¹⁸ Events of the following year would prove these assertions wrong. As Operation Poppy continued, a major clash occurred in the first half of July. First the insurgents reportedly attacked a government installation in Tavildara. Then on 11 July, a senior former UTO figure was killed – Ziyoyev, not Abdullo.

Since leaving government in 2006, General Ziyoyev had lived in his home village in Tavildara. A journalist who visited him there on 23 May 2009, a few days after news of the incursion broke, found him friendly but cautious, more interested in discussing the melon harvest than military operations. He said he would be willing to be an intermediary between government and any rebels “if God wills”; he also let drop that the deputy defence minister, his friend, had visited him two days prior to the interview. He seemed, however, to be trying to distance himself from recent developments.¹⁹

The government had a different version. Officials claimed that Ziyoyev had secretly thrown in his lot with Abdullo, but was captured on 11 July. At this point he supposedly repented and promised to negotiate the insurgents’ surrender. Later the same day, by the government’s account,

he was killed in a surprise insurgent attack – apparently the only fatality.²⁰

This version was met with considerable scepticism. It fell into a well-established pattern of the demise, either political or physical, of senior government or regional leaders whom the president and his coterie view as insufficiently loyal or as future threats. Such individuals are usually either imprisoned for corruption or drug dealing, or die under suspicious circumstances. Neither Abdullo nor his large unit were heard of again that year. In early August, the government announced victory. “The leaders of the terrorist group had hoped to replenish their forces”, an interior ministry official said, “but the vast majority of people, remembering the internecine violence of 1992-1997, did not fall for their provocative slogans”.²¹ Most accounts put the number of dead guerrillas at eleven. Some 49 were captured. Figures for government losses vary wildly.²²

A number of foreigners took part in the incursion. They included Russian nationals, from Dagestan, Chechnya and St Petersburg. The director of Tajikistan’s state security service told U.S. diplomats that twelve Russian militants had flown to Tajikistan from St Petersburg and Tyumen. The men had allegedly been on Russian wanted lists but had not been stopped, he said, apparently hinting that a Russian hand was behind the troubles.²³

Many of the Tajiks were locals; some had probably fought in the civil war, while others were too young to have done so. At least one fighter came from the northern Tajik district of Isfara, which is also viewed as a quietly developing stronghold of Islamic militancy. The foreign fighters were in many cases young – according to the officials, most in one group were born between 1983 and 1989.

¹⁵ “Полевого командира ищут в маке” [“Looking for a field commander among the poppies”], Kommersant Daily website, 22 May 2009, www.kommersant.ru/doc/1173679. Some reports added that his fighters included Chechens, Afghans and Arabs.

¹⁶ Western security officials noted that state security and interior ministry special forces were deployed, along with a defence ministry helicopter unit and substantial numbers of police. Crisis Group interview, Dushanbe, 8 April 2010.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, international observers, Dushanbe, April 2010.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Dushanbe, 28 March 2010.

¹⁹ Мирзо Зиев: “Я следую за Богом, и он сам мне велит... Ситуация в Тавильдаре в целом спокойная (интервью)” [“I follow God and he alone commands me ... the situation in Tavildara is on the whole calm”], CA-news website, 29 May 2009, www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1243544340.

²⁰ See, for example, “Эхо минувшей междоусобицы в Таджикистане...” [“The echo of a past internecine war in Tajikistan...”], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 17 July 2009, http://nvo.ng.ru/wars/2009-07-17/6_Tadjikistan.html.

²¹ Galina Gridneva, *Безопасность: Таджикистан-Антитеррор-Операция* [Security: Tajikistan-Antiterror-Operation], Itar-Tass, Dushanbe, 5 August 2009.

²² For death toll see: “Пересмотр наказания обвиненных в причастности к событиям в Тавильдаре” [Review of the sentences of those accused of complicity in the Tavildara events], Radio Ozodi, 25 February 2011, <http://www.ozodi.tj/content/article/2320999.html>. For arrests, see “Несколько граждан России и Узбекистана предстанут перед Верховным судом Таджикистана” [“Several citizens of Russia and Uzbekistan will appear before the Supreme Court of Tajikistan”], *ferghana.ru* website, 16 December 2009.

²³ “State Committee for National Security Defends Civilization”, U.S. embassy Dushanbe cable, 9 December 2009, as published by Wikileaks. http://wikileaks.ch/cable/2009/12/09_DUSHANBE1433.html.

Much of the international community seemed to accept the official Tajik story at face value. Some Western security analysts suggested that the number of insurgents was declining; some accepted that the operations were primarily aimed at the drug trade and were quite successful. U.S. officials noted that the operations were carried out without any outside support. A senior international official in Dushanbe, stressing that he had been briefed “in detail” by the Tajik security authorities, portrayed the operation as a “major” success for the government, rejecting out of hand the idea that it had been under any pressure from the intruders and asserting it had killed more Islamists than had been admitted.²⁴

It seems likely that Mullo Abdullo stayed on in the Rasht area through the winter. Akhmadov later recalled, in fact, that Abdullo had dropped by for a visit. He claimed to have informed the authorities, who did not react.²⁵

III. 2010: DISARRAY

In less than two months in the summer of 2010, any illusions that the Tajik authorities were in control of the situation in Rasht dissolved. Rakhmon’s image also changed, in the view of some major powers. From being a slightly embarrassing ally, ruthless but able to ensure guarantee stability on Afghanistan’s northern border, he became something of a disappointment. As a senior U.S. official remarked in the early autumn, “we thought he (Rakhmon) was more in control of his country”.²⁶

A. JAILBREAK

On 20 August 2010, 46 of those arrested during the Mullo Abdullo incursion were given sentences ranging from ten years to life in prison.²⁷ Two days later 25 prisoners staged a daring – and, for the government, deeply humiliating – prison break. The group included five Russians, all but one from Dagestan, four Afghans and two Uzbeks. Nearly all had been jailed for their part in the Mullo Abdullo raid.²⁸

The prisoners broke out of the ostensibly high security prison belonging to the State Committee for National Security (SCNS), located about 150 metres from the president’s official residence and the homes of other members of the Tajik elite. They in fact escaped from two establishments: the SCNS prison is surrounded by another penitentiary. They also moved at a leisurely pace, taking several hours to depart. One of the ringleaders was Ibrohim Nasreddinov, who had reportedly been extradited from Guantanamo in 2007 and subsequently sentenced to 23 years for terrorism-related offences. According to some accounts, he had won the trust of guards and was able to move around the prison after dark.²⁹ Three wardens were killed.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Brussels, 21 October 2010.

²⁷ “Таджикистан: Пять граждан России осуждены на сроки от 19,5 до 30 лет за попытку государственного переворота” [“Five Russian citizens sentenced to terms of from nineteen and a half to 30 years for attempted coup”], Ferghana.ru news service, 20 August 2010, www.ferghananews.com/news.php?id=15405&mode=snews.

²⁸ “ФСБ поможет Таджикистану поймать беглых мятежников” [“The FSB will help Tajikistan capture rebels on the run”], lenta.ru news site, 23 August 2010, <http://lenta.ru/news/2010/08/23/help1/>.

²⁹ “Таджикистан: Задержан один из сбежавших из СИЗО ГКНБ преступников” [“One of SCNS SIZO escaped criminals prisoners recaptured”], Ferghana.ru news service, 2 September 2010, www.ferghananews.com/news.php?id=15451.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, international officials, Dushanbe, March-April 2009.

²⁵ Akhmadov interview, *Asia Plus*, op. cit.

By May 2011, fourteen escapees had been recaptured and four killed. Seven were still at large.³⁰

B. TENSIONS RISE

The breakout seemed to focus Tajik leaders' minds on the danger of radicalism. Just over a week after the prison break Rakhmon unexpectedly called on families who had sent their sons abroad to study in Islamic religious institutions to bring them back as quickly as possible. "Unfortunately in the majority of cases the adolescents, left without control, do not study to be mullahs but embark on the path of terrorism and religious extremism", he warned. "They all have to be brought back, otherwise they will become traitors".³¹ Concern deepened on 3 September, when a suicide bomber – Tajikistan's first, officials claimed – attacked a police installation in Khujand, killing two by official accounts and many more according to persistent unofficial versions. A hitherto unknown organisation, Jamaat Ansorullo, later claimed responsibility, and in October two alleged IMU activists from the border district of Isfara were killed in a clash with the police. One was said to have been the organiser of the bombing, the other the widow of an IMU leader in the area who had been killed in 2006.³²

Other developments heightened the tension. In late July Interior Minister Abdurakhim Kakhkharov announced that the prosecutor general's office had reopened an investigation into the February 2008 death of OMON commander Zakharchenko. Akhmadov responded almost immediately. He and his men only wanted to be left in peace, he said. "But if it turns out that, despite the president's directive, someone again tries to draw us into the investigation, we will be obliged to take up arms to protect ourselves".³³ It was clear he still felt he could dictate terms to the central government.

Troops were again mobilised for operations in Rasht. The official explanation was that they were hunting for the escaped prisoners, and this message was duly delivered to local leaders in Rasht by senior government officials. Such an enormous deployment to search for 25 men, however, was not convincing, and became even less plausible in the weeks to come. Most successful operations to kill or recapture the prisoners took place well away from Rasht. Thirteen were found either in the capital, within roughly 70km of it, in the southern region of Khatlon, or in Afghanistan.³⁴

No official figures were given for the number of troops deployed in Rasht, but it probably amounted to several thousand.³⁵ "They mobilised everyone with a gun", said a senior international observer.³⁶ The deployment probably included anyone in the armed forces considered even faintly combat ready, and the country's Drug Control Agency (DCA) was ordered to send most of its armed operatives, further reducing its operations.³⁷

On paper Tajikistan has 7,300 soldiers and 7,500 paramilitaries, including 1,200 National Guard.³⁸ Corruption in the military is, however, a major business, an observer remarked, and only a small fraction could probably be fielded at any one moment.³⁹ A conscript who wants to stay at home rather than serve with his unit has to pay his commander about \$100 a month, according to the relative of a soldier who was doing this. A medical discharge would cost \$3,500, \$500 of which is paid to the doctor who draws up the necessary papers.⁴⁰ Those who stay in uniform often lack serious training. There are frequent claims that live-fire exercises in many units are a fiction. Relatives of a soldier serving in a security unit said he is often told to sign a form saying he expended a certain number of bullets, then returns to barracks without using his weapon. Officers allegedly pocket the unused bullets for resale.⁴¹

³⁰ "В Таджикистане вынесены приговоры в отношении работников СИЗО ГКНБ" ["Sentences passed on SCNS SIZO workers"], *Asia Plus*, 5 April 2011, <http://news.tj/ru/news/v-tadzhikistane-vynesenyy-prigovory-v-otnoshenii-rabotnikov-sizo-gknb>. Earlier reports said six or seven guards had been killed.

³¹ "Э. Рахмон: Их необходимо вернуть..." ["Rakhmon: they must be brought back"], *Asia Plus*, 2 September 2010, <http://news.tj/ru/newspaper/article/e-rakhmon-ikh-neobkhodimovernut>.

³² "ГКНБ Таджикистана: В Согде убит главный организатор теракта в Худжанде" ["SCNS: The main organiser of the Khujand terror attack killed in Sogd"], *Ferghana.ru* news site, 22 October 2010, www.ferghananews.com/news.php?id=15795.

³³ "Таджикистан: Полевой командир ОТО М.Ахмадов угрожал властям вновь взяться за оружие" ["UTO field commander M. Akhmadov threatens once again to take up arms"], *Ferghana.ru* news site, 27 July 2010, www.ferghananews.com/news.php?id=152650.

³⁴ One escapee was killed in Rasht, in May 2011. "В Раште убит бежавший заключенный" ["Escaped prisoner killed in Rasht"], *Radio Ozodi*, 14 May 2011, <http://rus.ozodi.org/content/article/24108579.html>. The escaped prisoner, Juma Ibrokhimov, was killed along with an IMU member, authorities told the radio.

³⁵ The most common estimates run from 3,000 to 5,000. Akhmadov claimed in January 2011 that 2,000 troops remained in the region.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, Dushanbe, 6 April 2011.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, narcotics specialist, Dushanbe, 7 April 2011.

³⁸ *The Military Balance*, International Institute of Strategic Studies (London, 2011), Chapter 6: Asia, p. 275.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, political analyst, Dushanbe, 14 April 2011.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, Dushanbe, 14 April 2011.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Dushanbe, 14 April 2011.

C. AMBUSH

On 19 September a convoy moving through the narrow, steep-sided Kamarob Gorge, to the north of Garm, was ambushed. Initial reports stated that at least 28 National Guard and other troops, including airborne, along with two colonels, were killed.⁴² An account published later and based on the recollections of one of the few survivors said 35 had died and described the gunmen coming down to administer the coup de grace to survivors then collecting weapons as they left. The report also mentioned in passing that police arrived 90 minutes later to evacuate the wounded.⁴³ By most accounts, the troops were caught unawares and had no time to fire back.

Unlike the 2009 fighting, which took place far from the public eye, the Kamarob ambush could not be airbrushed out of the news. It was a military and political disaster for the government and demonstrated that someone in the Rasht area was capable of deploying trained deadly force. The government blamed Akhmadov, Mullo Abdullo and another local commander, Alovuddin Davlatov, alias Ali Bedaki. Early accounts said they had been assisted by the IMU: Abdufattokh Akhmadi, an IMU spokesman, phoned Dushanbe's Radio Ozodi to claim responsibility.⁴⁴ Three days after the ambush, following desultory negotiations, government troops turned on Akhmadov and other local commanders. Akhmadov was accused of hiding Mullo Abdullo, organising training camps for "young fighters" and planning terror attacks in Dushanbe.⁴⁵

D. THE DEAL

Akhmadov narrowly escaped on 22 September, when his home was strafed and destroyed by two helicopters, and five of his fighters killed. He took to the hills with his gunmen and at least two other commanders, his deputy Olim Odilov and Shokh Iskandarov, the former Border

Guards officer. They were soon negotiating with the government, however. In Garm on 14 October, agreement was reached. Akhmadov and his men would hand over their weapons – a few weeks earlier they had denied having any – in return for a "full amnesty".⁴⁶ In return Akhmadov and associates would help track down those who, the government now said, were really behind the Kamarob operation. The official list of suspects had been narrowed to Mullo Abdullo and Ali Bedaki: there was no further talk of Akhmadov's alleged plans for terror attacks on the capital or his training of young fighters.

E. LOSSES

The 2010 Rasht operation dealt a disastrous blow to the image and what remained of the fighting capacity of Tajik military and security forces. Kamarob was the most visible setback, but the heaviest loss, in terms of fighting capacity, took place on 6 October. A helicopter carrying senior National Guard officers and special forces went down, either through enemy fire or an accident. The crash wiped out about 40 per cent of what is often viewed as the only Tajik military unit with serious counter-insurgency expertise. At least nineteen members of the unit, the State Security Committee's Alfa unit, were killed. Six or seven National Guard officers also died, including by most accounts two deputy commanders. Later in the year, SNSC chief Saymumin Yatimov privately admitted that he had 32 Alfa troops left on the books.⁴⁷

A curfew and the cutting of phone communications with Rasht during military operations – a technical problem, the government said – impeded news gathering. Information seeping out, however, made it clear that the government continued to suffer significant casualties. A regional commander of the OMON paramilitary police and several of his men were reported killed, for example; a mine destroyed a truck carrying a number of National Guard troops. Judging from official figures, albeit often contradictory and incoherent, the government forces seem to have suffered somewhat more casualties than the guerrillas. Most estimates of their losses start around 70.⁴⁸ The clearest estimate of guerrilla casualties came in late October from an unnamed interior ministry spokesman: "As of today twenty fighters have been annihilated and about 30 have

⁴² "Таджикистан: В ущелье Камароб погибли 25 и без вести пропали 25 военнослужащих" ["In the Kamarob Gorge 25 servicemen killed and 25 missing"], fergana.ru website, 29 September 2010, www.fergananews.com/news.php?id=15575.

⁴³ "Переживший камаробскую трагедию солдат рассказал подробности нападения боевиков" ["A soldier who survived the Kamarob tragedy recounts the details of the guerrilla attack"], Radio Ozodi, 27 April 2011, www.ozodi.org/content/kamarob_soldier_disabled_16795433.html.

⁴⁴ "Исламисты взяли на себя нападение на таджикских военных" ["Islamists have taken responsibility for the attack on Tajik troops"], lenta.ru news website, 23 September 2010, <http://lenta.ru/news/2010/09/23/claim>.

⁴⁵ "Мирзохуджа Ахмадов готовил теракты в Душанбе" ["Mirzokhuja Akhmadov was preparing terror acts in Dushanbe"], *Asia Plus*, 23 September 2010, <http://news.tj/ru/news/mirzokhudzha-akhmadov-gotovil-terakty-v-dushanbe>.

⁴⁶ "На востоке Таджикистана прошли переговоры правительства с бывшими полевыми командирами" ["In the east of Tajikistan former government negotiations took place with former field commanders"], *Asia Plus*, 14 October 2010, <http://news.tj/ru/news/na-vostoke-tadzhikistana-proshli-peregovory-pravitelstva-s-byvshimi-polevymi-komandirami>.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, Western official, 2 April 2011.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomat, international official, senior Tajik journalist, Dushanbe, April 2011.

laid down their weapons and crossed over to the side of the government forces”.⁴⁹

In November, SCNS director Yatimov in effect declared victory. Islamist guerrillas in the area had either been killed or surrendered, he said. There was “no need to worry about the situation in the Rasht zone. The situation is fully under control”. There were just five or six guerrillas left, blockaded in the mountains.⁵⁰ He added that “the border with Afghanistan is controlled at the appropriate level”.⁵¹

F. AFTERMATH: THE HUNTED TURNED HUNTERS

The real mopping up started only after Yatimov’s reassuring words. In the next few months Akhmadov and the amnestied commanders tracked down the other warlords, killing over 25. In January 2011, Akhmadov was closely involved in the destruction of a group of fighters led by his old guerrilla comrade in arms and colleague in the Organised Crime Department (UBOP), Ali Bedaki, who was hiding in a village just outside Garm.

Soon afterwards, Akhmadov said in an interview that he had observed the operation from a command post some 500 metres from the fighting, in the company of top military and State Security officers. Although Bedaki was officially reported killed along with his men, a disturbing video later made the rounds, showing him, stripped to his underpants, being interrogated in a vehicle. One of his military captors casually held a pistol close by his head. He was asked who had carried out the Kamarob attack; his answer captured the byzantine nature of the operations. “If I tell you, you won’t believe me”. It is thought that he was executed soon after the video was made.⁵²

Ali Bedaki’s elderly father was subsequently arrested and charged with being an accessory to his son’s activities, and his brother was sentenced in January 2011 to eleven

and a half years on similar charges. The government refused to return the fighters’ corpses to families, apparently copying a highly controversial Russian practice in the North Caucasus.⁵³

In mid-April 2011, Akhmadov and his associates moved on Mullo Abdullo, who was hiding in Samsolik, a village in his old area of control some 50km from Garm. On the eve of the attack, Akhmadov’s deputy, Olim Odilov, explained he might not be available to meet a visitor the following day: he would be travelling in the district. “I am a servant of the state”, he explained, “my time is not my own”.⁵⁴ After two days of fighting, in which the government reportedly deployed helicopters and armour, Mullo Abdullo and sixteen fighters were finally killed on 15 April. Seven were identified along with their date of birth; six of them were born between 1981 and 1994.⁵⁵ Initial reports said a special forces fighter and three interior ministry troops had been killed on the government side. These losses were later denied.

G. SAMSOLIK: BACKGROUND TO A BATTLE

A brief look at the situation in Nurobod district, where Samsolik is located, offers a glimpse of a farming area in decline and a political and religious community in transition. Poor and almost totally dependent on agriculture, mostly subsistence farming, the district is increasingly vulnerable to natural disasters – landslides, mud slides and avalanches – that are further eroding a grim standard of living.

International organisations regularly designate Nurobod, along with other parts of the Rasht valley, as areas of food insecurity – poor nutrition and often fewer than two meals per day.⁵⁶ A considerable part of the district’s arable land will be submerged if work continues on President Rakhmon’s ambitious plans to build one of the largest dams in the world at Rogun.⁵⁷

⁴⁹ “В Раште обезврежено ещё трое боевиков, один – тяжело ранен” [“In Rasht three more fighters are disarmed, one is badly wounded”], *Asia Plus*, 25 October 2010.

⁵⁰ “Вооруженная группировка мулло абдулло практически разгромлена” [“Mullo Abdullo’s armed group is to all intents and purposes crushed”], *Asia Plus*, 9 November 2011 <http://news.tj/ru/news/vooruzhennaya-gruppirovka-mullo-abdullo-prakticheski-razgromlena-s-yatimov>.

⁵¹ “Таджикистан: Спецоперация в Раштской долине фактически завершена” [“Tajikistan: The special operation in the Rasht Valley is practically over”], *Ferghana.ru* news site, 9 November 2010, www.ferghananews.com/news.php?id=15891&mode=snews.

⁵² The video was removed from YouTube, but as of April 2011 could once again be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYOKCixY8eg&feature=related, with partial Russian language subtitles.

⁵³ “Куда делись тела членов бандформирования Али Бедаки?” [“What happened to the bodies of Ali Bedaki’s armed group?”], *Asia Plus*, 14 January 2011, <http://news.tj/ru/newspaper/article/kuda-delis-tela-chlenov-bandformirovaniya-ali-bedaki>.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, Dushanbe, 14 April 2011.

⁵⁵ “Спецслужбы РТ: Мулло Абдулло был руководителем Аль-Каиды в Таджикистане” [“RT Special Services: Mullo Abdullo was al-Qaeda leader in Tajikistan”], *Radio Ozodi*, 20 April 2011, www.ozodi.tj/content/al-qaida_mullo_abdullo_tajikistan/9500121.html.

⁵⁶ See, for example, “Tajikistan: Food Security Monitoring System”, World Food Programme, at www.wfp.org/content/tajikistan-food-security-monitoring-system-2010.

⁵⁷ “A Review of Regional Disaster Vulnerability Produced by the Tajik Government’s Committee on Emergency Situations”,

Samsolik itself, the site of Mullo Abdullo's last battle, is home to the mosque of a highly-regarded Muslim cleric, Zaynalobiddin Mannonov. He was arrested in September 2010, during the military operations, and in January 2011 was sentenced to five years for inciting religious hatred and extremist activity; some press accounts say he was also accused of membership in a banned Salafist Islamic group.⁵⁸ Senior figures in the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) disputed the charges and spoke out in his defence. Three of the dead fighters named so far have the cleric's surname. Almost all the fighters come from the same village, which is not far from the mosque.

Tajik security services claimed, without providing evidence, that Mullo Abdullo had been appointed al-Qaeda chief for Tajikistan and said they had found a flag of the Jamaat Ansorullo, a group unknown until it claimed responsibility for the September 2010 suicide bombing in Khujand.⁵⁹ Samsolik could well have recently become an outpost of militant Islamist guerrillas; the young people who died could, however, equally have been responding to economic hopelessness and seeking revenge for the arrest of a respected religious teacher and relative. In a propaganda statement issued shortly after Mullo Abdullo's death in April 2011, Tajik guerrillas singled out the Rogun dam for criticism, noting the way people had been forced to contribute money for its construction. "Even if it is ever built, no one other than the Rakhmon family will see any benefit from it".⁶⁰

H. WHO IS IN CHARGE?

Some Western observers maintain that the government is determined to hold on to Rasht. In fact, it seems to be doing little more than holding the line – and is doing so by making deals with the very fighters it was a few months earlier trying to dislodge or destroy. This leaves a distinct

impression that the government is running out of ideas as well as trained counter-insurgency troops.

The deal with Akhmadov seems more like a surrender of authority than a cunning political move. Akhmadov remains the area's power broker. Iskandarov's appointment as Rasht's deputy chief of police – a position he received with the minimum of publicity in early April 2011⁶¹ – gives him major clout in the region. The president may be trying, as so often in the past, to make temporary alliances with powerful figures, with the aim of eliminating them as soon as possible. Ruthless survivors like Akhmadov and Iskandarov, however, are well aware of these tactics. Akhmadov has survived several attempts to eliminate him and knows what to expect. Meanwhile the president's compromises with the former opposition commanders have led to several discreet but clear signals of unhappiness from the security bloc.

Soon after the presidential amnesty was announced, Interior Minister Kakhkharov seemed to qualify or perhaps even question its terms. "No one said Akhmadov is innocent", he told journalists. Military prosecutors will investigate the Kamarob ambush and, he was quoted as saying, "will determine the involvement and degree of guilt of each participant in the attack, including Mirzokhuja Akhmadov".⁶² This is an intriguing statement, given the president's record of implacably removing anyone whose loyalty he doubts. The security sector, however, believes Akhmadov killed one of theirs – Zakharchenko – and has not been punished, a close observer noted. "They will not give up till they get him".⁶³ This is not an alliance built to last, and it is not the way to design a security policy. There is no guarantee it will even solve the problem in Rasht.

I. "WE GOT THE MESSAGE: WE HAVE A PROBLEM"

Tajikistan plays a modest but important role in the U.S. Afghanistan strategy. A 16 February 2010 cable prepared for the late Ambassador Richard Holbrooke by the U.S. embassy in Dushanbe spelled this out. "There is some truth to the quip that Tajikistan's real contribution to our

undated, [www.khf.tj/Uploads/imac_pdf/Otchet po prog razv rayonov/Nurabad/Nurobod DRR section_RUS.pdf](http://www.khf.tj/Uploads/imac_pdf/Otchet_po_prog_razv_rayonov/Nurabad/Nurobod_DRR_section_RUS.pdf).

⁵⁸"Осужден религиозный деятель" ["Religious figure condemned"], Stan TV news site, 31 January 2011, <http://stan.tv/news/19352/?print=1&REID=g4ik7n7hkhkimv0en4nb2rov76>.

⁵⁹"Спецслужбы РТ: Мулло Абдулло был руководителем Аль-Каиды в Таджикистане" ["RT Special Services: Mullo Abdullo was al-Qaeda leader in Tajikistan"], Radio Ozodi, 20 April 2011, www.ozodi.tj/content/al-qaida_mullo_abdullo_tajikistan/9500121.html.

⁶⁰"ТАДЖИКИСТАН. Моджахеды Таджикистана выступили с обращением в связи с Шихадой амира Мулло Абдулло" ["Tajikistan: The mujahidin of Tajikistan have issued a statement in connection with the martyrdom of Amir Mullo Abdullo"], 21 April 2011, Kavkaz Center, www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2011/04/21/80912.shtml. Kavkaz Center is in turn citing <http://irshod.net/index.php?newsid=290>, a frequently blocked website. The statement was in part tribute to Mullo Abdullo and in part threat of more attacks to come.

⁶¹"Шох Искандаров назначен зам. начальника УВД Раштской долины" ["Shokh Iskandarov appointed seputy chief of the Internal Affairs Directorate of the Rasht Valley"], [avesta.tj news website](http://avesta.tj/newswebsite), 14 April 2011, <http://avesta.tj/index.php?newsid=8119>. Other reports indicated he had in fact been appointed at the beginning of the month.

⁶²"А. Каххаров: Никто не говорил, что Ахмадов невиновен" ["No-one said Akhmadov is innocent"], *Asia Plus*, 21 October 2010, <http://news.tj/ru/newspaper/article/kakhkharov-nikto-ne-govoril-chto-akhmadov-nevinoven>.

⁶³Crisis Group interview, Tajik political analyst, Dushanbe, 14 April 2011.

efforts in Afghanistan is to be stable, and to allow unfettered over-flight and transit to our forces – which the Tajiks have done unfailingly”.⁶⁴ Washington had few illusions about the country. “From the president down to the policeman on the street, government is characterised by cronyism and corruption. Rakhmon and his family control the country’s major businesses, including the largest bank, and they play hardball to protect their business interests, no matter the cost to the economy writ large”.⁶⁵

After the 2010 Rasht operations, concern deepened about Rakhmon’s hold on power. Tajikistan started to be singled out as the most problematic country in an unstable region. Increasingly, officials in Washington and elsewhere noted, the term “failed state” began to crop up in references to the country.⁶⁶ Speaking to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence exactly a year after the Holbrooke cable, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper noted that “as the U.S. increases reliance on Central Asia to support operations in Afghanistan, the region’s political and social stability is becoming more important”. After briefly alluding to problems in Kyrgyzstan, he singled out one key problem: “In 2010, Tajikistan’s President Rakhmon was forced to negotiate with regional warlords after failing to defeat them militarily, an indicator that Dushanbe is potentially more vulnerable to an Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan with renewed interests in Central Asia”.⁶⁷

IV. CENTRAL ASIAN GUERRILLAS IN NORTHERN AFGHANISTAN

Since at least 2009, there have been steadily increasing reports of Central Asian guerrillas operating in the northern provinces of Afghanistan. Most are described as members of the IMU, founded in the late 1990s in the Uzbek areas of the Ferghana Valley. The Islamic Jihad Union, an IMU off-shoot, is occasionally mentioned but seems mostly to be concentrating its attention on terror attacks in Uzbekistan and Europe.⁶⁸ Analyst and intelligence estimates – possibly closer to guesses – put IMU fighting strength in the low thousands.⁶⁹ If anywhere near correct, this is a dramatic transformation after what appeared to be near-annihilation by U.S. forces in Afghanistan in late 2001. What is clear is that the movement has over the past decade evolved into an ethnically diverse movement, embracing jihadists from across Central Asia, the former Soviet Union and possibly Xinjiang in China.

Communications have undergone a fundamental change with the growth of the internet. Links between Islamic militants in Central Asia, Afghanistan and the former Soviet Union are no longer linear. Traditional lines of command and communication are supplemented by an informal web of contacts at multiple levels across the internet. Such channels of information provide important role models for the new generation of fighters and almost certainly serve as a recruiting tool. It is no longer exceptional to find a Tajik supporter of the IMU paying tribute to the Russian-Buryat guerrilla propagandist Said Buryatsky, killed in Ingushetia in March 2010;⁷⁰ or a Dagestani guerrilla website publishing a paean to the international mujahidin operating along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border;⁷¹ or the Caucasus Emirate publishing an appeal from “Mu-

⁶⁴ “TJ Scen setter for Holbrooke February 2010”, U.S. Embassy Dushanbe cable, 10 February 2010, as published by Wikileaks, <http://wikileaks.ch/cable/2010/02/10DUSHANBE173.html>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, official, Washington DC, 17 November 2010.

⁶⁷ James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, Statement for the Record on the Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 16 February 2011, http://dni.gov/testimonies/20110216_testimony_sfr.pdf.

⁶⁸ The Islamic Jihad Union is thought to have split from the IMU in the early 2000s. It has launched operations, or claimed responsibility for them, in Uzbekistan, starting with suicide attacks in 2004. In 2007 four alleged members were arrested in Germany on suspicion of planning an attack on unidentified U.S. or other Western facilities and sentenced to up to twelve years in prison. They have sometimes been reported operating in Afghanistan. National Counterterrorism Center, Counterterrorism Calendar 2011, www.nctc.gov/site/groups/iju.html.

⁶⁹ Press reports of Pakistani military action around Kanigarom, often described as IMU’s main location in the border areas, spoke of an estimated 1,500 fighters. “Pakistan army targets Uzbek base”, BBC News, 29 October 2009.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, April 2011.

⁷¹ Чёрные Знамена Хорасана, 26 April 2011, www.jamaatshariat.com/-mainmenu-29/14-facty/1537-2011-04-25-22-02-47.html.

jahidin of Tajikistan” paying tribute to Mullo Abdullo and calling for attacks on police and government officials.⁷²

A. ENDURING FREEDOM

The U.S. and allied assault on northern Afghanistan in 2001 was a disaster for the IMU.⁷³ After breaking with the Tajik UTO over the latter’s acceptance of the 1997 peace agreement, and a well-publicised but unsuccessful incursion into southern Kyrgyzstan in 1999, the IMU had shifted its base to Afghanistan. It played a major role in the last battles of the Taliban regime; according to some accounts, IMU military commander Juma Namangani was made deputy defence minister and commander of the northern front. He and many IMU fighters were killed in November 2001; his standing among both the Taliban and al-Qaeda was underlined by U.S. intelligence reports that, in the last days of the Taliban regime, Osama bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, made what is described as a “risky” trip to a memorial service for him.⁷⁴

Soon after the Taliban defeat, the IMU survivors regrouped to Wana in the Pakistani region of Waziristan and for a time faded out of the picture. For a number of years, Western intelligence analysts expressed confidence that the IMU was finished as a fighting force. This impression was reinforced in 2007, when news filtered out of Waziristan that Uzbeks – usually thought to have included IMU – had been attacked and forced from the area by local tribesmen. The accounts were sketchy, and media claims that the Uzbeks were facing their last stand were overwrought. A continuing leitmotif in any reference to IMU fighters, however, was their ferocity in combat and religious rigidity – a reputation that has accompanied them ever since Chechnya.⁷⁵

B. REBIRTH

It seems more likely, however, that during this time the movement was quietly receiving an infusion of new blood – in some cases guerrillas with extensive combat experi-

ence, in others a new generation of would-be fighters. They came mostly from Central Asia and the North Caucasus. The first reinforcements probably started to arrive at the end of 2001 and early 2002. After the destruction of the Chechen resistance’s main fighting force in early 2000, there were numerous anecdotal reports of Chechen fighters heading for Afghanistan.

This was a difficult journey but a logical choice. The Taliban were the only government that had extended any form of recognition to Chechnya, in 2000. Theologically the jihadist wing of the Chechen resistance was very close to the Taliban, which they on more than one occasion described as the only true Islamic state in the world today. Hundreds if not thousands of Central Asian and North Caucasus fighters trained together in south-eastern Chechnya between 1995 and 1999. The Caucasus Centre, founded in the village of Serzhen Yurt in a former children’s summer camp by Shamil Basayev and his close colleague, Ibn al-Khattab, a Saudi Arabian veteran of the Afghan war, provided extensive weapons and explosives training.⁷⁶ Instructors were both Chechens and Arabs; a fairly conservative estimate puts the number of graduates in the high hundreds, and possibly over 1,000.⁷⁷

The Centre was also known for the quality of its equipment: Russian troops who had captured the buildings complained to journalists in February 2000 that the former students who were still attacking them had considerably superior weaponry. Uzbek guerrillas were last reported operating in the area in the middle of 2000.⁷⁸ The Centre was seminal in the creation of a new generation of jihadist fighters in both Central Asia and the North Caucasus. Graduates are still active: an IMU propaganda film distributed in late 2010 showed a former student at the Centre, Commander Musa, an Uzbek. A Dagestan commander killed in April 2011 was also described as a former student.⁷⁹

⁷²“ТАДЖИКИСТАН. Моджахеды Таджикистана” [“Tajikistan: The mujahidin of Tajikistan”], op. cit.

⁷³For an examination of the IMU at that point in its history, see Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°11, *The IMU and the Hizb ut-Tahrir: Implications of the Afghanistan Campaign*, 30 January 2002.

⁷⁴“Tora Bora Revisited: How We Failed To Get Bin Laden And Why It Matters Today”, A Report To Members Of The Committee On Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, 30 November 2009.

⁷⁵For the bloody reputation acquired by the IMU in south Waziristan, which resulted in its expulsion from the area in 2007, see <http://spaces.brad.ac.uk:8080/download/attachments/748/Attacks+on+Uzbek+Militants+in+South+Waziristan.pdf>. For its reputation in Chechnya, see fn. 78; for its 2011 reputation in Kunduz, see fn. 89.

⁷⁶Khattab first offered his services to the UTO in the Tajik civil war. He was quickly encouraged to move on, however, a former aide to UTO leader Abdullo Nuri recalled. UTO officials suspected that Khattab was trying to train suicide bombers. Crisis Group interview, former Nuri aide, Dushanbe, 7 April 2011.

⁷⁷Interview by Crisis Group staff in former position, former Maskhadov-era security official, Grozny, October 2004.

⁷⁸Interview by Crisis Group staff in former position, Wolf’s Gate, southern Chechnya, May 2000. Russian troops said the Uzbek fighters were particularly cruel.

⁷⁹Since 2000 there have been widespread but sparsely documented reports that hundreds of Chechens were trained in Afghanistan during Taliban rule and then fought alongside the Taliban in its final days. There is very little evidence for this. Examination after the fall of the Taliban of Kabul houses occupied by Russian-speaking jihadists produced material more likely to be IMU than Chechen. Research by Crisis Group staffer in former position, Kabul, December 2001. And the fact that

The next infusion, better documented and possibly more significant in terms of jihadist politics, took place the following year. When the Islamist guerrilla movement in Dagestan was at a low ebb, in 2001-2002, the head of its radical jamaat, Khabibullakh and an unknown number of his comrades took refuge in Afghanistan. There, according to the Dagestan guerrillas' Jamaat Shariat website, Khabibullakh became commander of the "Russian-speaking jamaat attached to al-Qaeda".⁸⁰ The outflow may have continued: residents of Vedeno, a Chechen guerrilla stronghold on the border with Dagestan, several years later reported that young Dagestanis had left recently for Afghanistan.⁸¹

A self-described Tajik IMU representative said in April 2011 that some of the young Dagestanis who had fought in Tajikistan in 2009 and 2010 were "probably" the fruit of a continuing Dagestan-IMU link.⁸² Further outflows to Afghanistan from Central Asia have been posited, without convincing proof, after various outbreaks of violence in the region – the May 2005 uprising and massacre in Andijon, Uzbekistan, and the June 2010 ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan.⁸³

An observer who follows the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan closely says that the inflow of young Uzbeks after Andijon was reported to be in the high hundreds.⁸⁴ After the June 2010 ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan, some 200 young ethnic Uzbeks from the area were rumoured to have gone to Afghanistan for military training. A senior government minister with responsibility for southern Kyrgyzstan said he had seen no information to substantiate this claim,⁸⁵ while a ranking counter-terror official stated in January 2011 that there was no evidence of radicalisation among the Uzbeks of southern Kyrgyzstan.⁸⁶

At the end of April 2011, however, the head of Kyrgyzstan's state security service, Keneshbek Dushebayev, told the parliament that "400 Kyrgyz citizens, predominantly of Uzbek ethnicity", were receiving terrorist training in

Afghanistan and Pakistan. The trainees were separatists and had gone to the camps after the June 2010 violence. He also added that a Kyrgyz analogy of the IMU had been formed, the Islamic Movement of Kyrgyzstan.⁸⁷ An IMU propaganda film from December 2010 gave a sense of the internationalisation of the movement. A brief survey of recent *shahids* (martyrs) included a commander from the Caucasus Centre, along with a number of much younger Uzbeks, Tajiks and an ethnic Russian, as well as a Moroccan and several young Afghan volunteers. Some of the Central Asians were very young indeed; a few looked to be in their mid-teens.⁸⁸

C. NORTHERN AFGHANISTAN: HYPHENATED TALIBAN

Observers on both sides of the Tajik-Afghan border feel that IMU and its allies are increasingly active in northern Afghanistan and are almost certainly growing in numbers. Politicians from northern Afghanistan describe substantial numbers of Tajik, Uzbek and other "hyphenated Taliban", either operating jointly or in coordination with their Afghan counterparts in Kunduz. The International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) reports often speak of IMU cadre operating jointly with the Taliban. An Afghan politician from the Kunduz area, however, describes the IMU fighters as "stronger and stricter" than their Taliban counterparts.⁸⁹ As usual, numbers are rare and unreliable. One indication of the magnitude of IMU activity is a Pakistani claim in July 2009 that 250 IMU activists had been arrested in that country since the beginning of the year.⁹⁰

Afghan officials believe that Pakistan was directly involved in the IMU's build-up in the north. The transfer of IMU fighters from Waziristan to northern Afghanistan was arranged and facilitated by Pakistan's military intelligence, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), they assert. This was partly to relieve pressure on the Taliban in southern Afghanistan, and partly to deter the U.S. and NATO from

Dagestanis allegedly created the Russian-speaking al-Qaeda jamaat (see below) would, if correct, suggest an absence of Chechen candidates.

⁸⁰ "Амир Дагестанского Фронта и Къадий Имарата Кавказ Сайфуллах. Часть 2 - Джихад" ["The Amir of the Dagestan Front and Qadi of the Caucasus Emirate Sayfullakh. Part 2 – Jihad"], website of the Dagestan Front, 13 August 2010. www.jamaatshariat.com/islam/28-islam/1105—2-.html.

⁸¹ Interviews by Crisis Group staff in former position, residents, Vedeno, October 2004.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, IMU activist, April 2011.

⁸³ See Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°38, *Uzbekistan: The Andijon Uprising*, 25 May 2005; and Crisis Group Asia Report N°193, *The Pogroms in Kyrgyzstan*, 23 August 2010.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, Kabul, 12 October 2011.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior minister, 14 March 2011.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, Dushanbe, 21 January 2011.

⁸⁷ "На юге Кыргызстана проходят совместные антитеррористические учения" ["In the south of Kyrgyzstan joint anti-terror exercises are underway"], Ferghana.ru news site, 3 May 2011, www.ferghananews.com/news.php?id=16683. Dushebayev's statements have not always withstood the test of time. See Crisis Group Report, *The Pogroms in Kyrgyzstan*, op. cit.

⁸⁸ The video was viewed on several occasions by a Crisis Group analyst, most recently in late April 2011, at www.atimes.com/video/saleem090211.html. A second instalment is promised.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, Kabul, 12 October 2010.

⁹⁰ "С начала года в Пакистане задержано 250 членов ИДУ, среди которых есть и таджики, – глава МВД Пакистана" ["Since the beginning of the year 250 IMU members have been detained in Pakistan, among them Tajiks – head of Pakistan's Interior Ministry"], *Asia Plus*, 29 July 2009, www.asiaplus.tj/news/47/55313.html.

diverting too much of their supply chain from Pakistan to Central Asia. Both Afghan officials and politicians and German intelligence analysts – much of the German war effort is concentrated in the north of Afghanistan – expected a further deterioration in that part of the country in 2011.⁹¹

D. PROBING: “THEY CAN SMELL WEAKNESS”

Since the IMU build-up in northern Afghanistan was first noticed, multiple sources – officials on both sides of the border, residents of areas like Rasht and IMU sympathisers – have been reporting a small but steady flow of fighters crossing the Tajik-Afghan border and heading north.⁹² They often pass through Rasht, crossing into Kyrgyzstan or moving on to northern Tajikistan. From there they probably cross into Batken – an area that Islamic guerrillas use regularly for rest and recreation, according to some Western sources.⁹³

They then either continue along the Kyrgyz side of the Uzbek border to Osh and Jalalabad, or cross into Uzbekistan. Some clashes with security forces have been reported in Kyrgyzstan and rumoured in Uzbekistan, a country that is efficient in turning off the news flow when it wishes. The relative infrequency of such events speaks either to the small numbers taking this route, or the ease with which they can move unchallenged or undetected. Some Kyrgyz officials believe the second reason is more likely: corrupt police and security forces create few problems for those with enough money, they note; and the situation has if anything become easier since the June 2010 violence in Osh and Jalalabad.⁹⁴

Immediately after the unrest, officials say, both guerrillas and drug dealers sharply increased the transit of fighters and drugs through the area.⁹⁵ The continuing demoralisation of the police and security organs due to the chaos that reigns in southern Kyrgyzstan makes the route attractive for fighters.

Occasional arrests indicate that at least some of the fighters using the route are engaged in long-term planning rather than immediate combat missions. Both Kyrgyz and Tajik security forces have reported the detention of IMU support or logistical specialists.⁹⁶ A strong indication of this trend surfaced in July 2009, when eighteen alleged terrorists of Uzbek, Kazakh and Kyrgyz nationality were arrested in southern Kyrgyzstan. Among them were people who “were engaged in the preparation of fake passports, arranging conspiratorial apartments, transport, communications and food for groups of fighters”.⁹⁷

This suggests the infiltrators are looking at the long term – setting up support structures for future operations. They are also probably probing for power vacuums or vulnerabilities, areas where local administrations are too weak or perhaps too corrupt to take on infiltrators. Guerrilla movements are inherently opportunistic and remarkably swift in identifying and exploiting such flaws: “they can smell weakness”, said the head of a Central Asian counter-insurgency organisation.⁹⁸ Tajikistan (and southern Kyrgyzstan) offer such enticing weaknesses in abundance.

Some analysts feel that the IMU guerrillas are not at this point interested in challenging the regime. They may prefer an enfeebled regime that allows them to maintain a discreet presence and gradually expand their presence in regions of interest, like Isfara, on the Kyrgyz border to the north-east, or Rasht. It would not be surprising if they borrowed the tactics adopted by the Pakistani Taliban in Waziristan in late 2007 and early 2008, when Taliban military pressure finally induced the government to agree to a discreet ceasefire. The government’s recent agreement with Akhmadov, although not favourable to the IMU, could be seen as a precedent for future guerrilla tactics.

Other analysts believe, however, the IMU may be tempted to take a more active line. If for any reason the IMU felt the need to demonstrate its strength, it might choose to do so in Tajikistan: the country increasingly looks, an experienced international observer remarked, like an “easy knock-over”.⁹⁹

⁹¹ Crisis Group interviews, Kabul, October 2010; and Berlin, November 2010.

⁹² A senior Afghan official questioned the assertion that the number of guerrillas crossing was small. Guerrillas move into Tajikistan “on a daily basis, whenever they can find a conducive environment”, he said. “The Americans are in a state of denial” over the numbers crossing. “They have no idea”. Crisis Group interview, senior official, Kabul, 10 October 2010.

⁹³ Crisis Group interview, international official, Kyrgyzstan, 31 January 2011.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior government minister, Kyrgyzstan, 14 March 2011.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, government counter-insurgency official, international officials, Kyrgyzstan, March 2011.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, government counter-insurgency official, 21 January 2011.

⁹⁷ “В Кыргызстане за причастность к террористической деятельности арестованы 18 человек” [“Eighteen people arrested in Kyrgyzstan for involvement in terrorist activities”], 24.kg news service, 17 July 2009, www.24.kg/investigation/2009/07/17/116289.html.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, 21 January 2011.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior international observer, Dushanbe, 6 April 2011.

E. A VERY AFGHAN JIHAD

Despite their Central Asian roots and apparent strength – and the proven weakness of the troops facing them – the IMU has not yet taken its fight across the Tajik border. No one is sure why, in part because no one seems to have a reasonable picture of either the movement’s strategy or order of battle. As one specialist remarked, experts working on this question probably know 5 to 10 per cent of what they would like to know.¹⁰⁰

Fragments of information, and occasional statements by the movement or its allies, suggest a plausible line of reasoning: that the IMU views the battle for Afghanistan as the central international obligation of all jihadists, a struggle imbued not just with strategic significance, but religious and historical import as well. IMU sympathisers still quote their late leader, Tahir Yuldashev, as saying their fight was for the shariat state, “not just a piece of earth”.¹⁰¹ Supporters sometimes cite a quotation from the Hadith, telling the faithful that if they see black banners from the direction of Khorasan, go to them, even if you have to crawl, “because among them will be Allah’s Caliph, the Mahdi”.

In its discussion of the black banners, an influential jihadist site went further, describing the Taliban-controlled borderlands between Pakistan and Afghanistan as a unique area comparable to Medina in the days of the Prophet: “nowhere else is there concentrated similar multi-ethnic multi-confessional forces bringing together the most passionate Islamic elements from the whole world, whose ideology is free of any priorities (in particular national or territorial) other than accomplishing their religious duties before Allah”.¹⁰²

One highly experienced U.S. government specialist on Central Asia argues, on the other hand, that the reasons are purely pragmatic: the guerrillas have simply been unable to cultivate reliable counterparts within the country. “It’s not easy for foreign fighters to cultivate local hosts willing to take the brunt of Dushanbe’s fire, as weak and inefficient as it often is, and upset whatever business arrangements they currently have with Dushanbe and/or others ...”, the specialist says. “Tajikistan just hasn’t shown itself, yet anyway, to be a safe haven or a secure platform

from which to launch attacks on Dushanbe or elsewhere in Central Asia”.¹⁰³

F. EXTERNAL POWERS AND INTERNAL SECURITY

If the security situation does sharply deteriorate, there are few indications that the Rakhmon government could handle it on its own. The nature of the Central Asian region – each country has long and usually poorly-policed boundaries with several neighbours – means that a breakdown in security in one country could quickly have a knock-on effect. The outside forces most interested in regional security – China, Russia, the U.S. in the first instance – might then, like it or not, find themselves forced to become involved.

China, in public at least, behaves as if there is no reason to depart from its current policy in the region, which centres on the acquisition of natural resources and energy. It makes friends with the dispensation of generous funds and, according to private businessmen, pays equally generous bribes. A deterioration in Central Asian security would, however, force it to review its plans. Chinese concern over any breakdown in Tajikistan’s security would be heightened by its 400km border with Xinjiang. In one possible sign of growing Chinese concern about the situation, Chinese, Kyrgyz and Tajik security forces were reported in May 2011 to have conducted joint counter-terror exercises in Xinjiang. The training included the freeing of hostages and “the liquidation of a terrorist training camp in the district of Kashgar”.¹⁰⁴ Russia is increasingly concerned at the damage wrought on its society by drugs from Afghanistan – the country currently consumes about 21 per cent of the world’s heroin production¹⁰⁵ – and haunted by the fear of Islamic militants seeping through Tajikistan and on – via the 6,000km Kazakh-Russian border – into its southern regions.

The U.S. timeframe in Central Asia is probably much shorter than that of China and Russia. One can argue that much of its security interest in the region is coterminous with its presence in Afghanistan. Post-Afghanistan, attention is likely to shift to the resource-rich states of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. At the moment, Kyrgyzstan’s Manas airport and U.S. base is the main transit point for troops

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, terrorism specialist, January 2011.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, IMU activist, April 2011. Yuldashev, the IMU leader from its foundation, was reported to have been killed or badly injured in a drone attack in late August 2009. In mid-August 2010, the IMU admitted he was dead and announced he had been replaced by Usman Odil, about whom little is known.

¹⁰² “Чёрные Знамена Хорасана” [“The Black Banners of Khorasan”], 26 April 2011, at www.jamaatshariat.com/-mainmenu-29/14-facty/1537-2011-04-25-22-02-47.html.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group email correspondence, Washington DC, 2 May 2010.

¹⁰⁴ “В Китае прошло совместное антитеррористическое учение государств-членов ШОС” [“Joint anti-terror training by SCO member states in China”], akipress news service, 13 May 2011, <http://kg.akipress.org/news:367441>.

¹⁰⁵ “World Drug Review 2010”, p. 49, at www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2010/World_Drug_Report_2010_lo-res.pdf.

going to and leaving Afghanistan. Uzbekistan is the vital hub – and sometimes bottle-neck – in the Northern Distribution Network, the supply lines that are expected eventually to carry the majority of supplies for the war effort in Afghanistan. Other countries, including Tajikistan, provide important over-flight rights.

Starting late in 2009, according to regional leaders,¹⁰⁶ U.S. special forces have expanded their activities in the region. Most are said to involve regular short-duration deployment to conduct military training. Considerable numbers are, meanwhile, engaged in military operations on the other side of the border, against the IMU and Taliban. U.S. officials deny their forces cross the border in hot pursuit, a term they in any case dismiss as unmilitary. U.S. diplomats in the region have suggested, however, that as the Tajik-Afghan border is poorly demarcated, units might not be aware they have crossed into Tajikistan.¹⁰⁷ Despite these disclaimers there are numerous precedents of classified special forces cross-border operations, largely for intelligence purposes, in other conflicts.¹⁰⁸

Following the Rasht debacle, Tajikistan's State Committee for National Security approached Western diplomats for assistance in expanding the Alfa force from about 32 to 500.¹⁰⁹ The request seems to have met with a cool response. Training, though undoubtedly needed, would seem impractical. It is doubtful whether a command structure like the Tajik military, premised on unquestioning loyalty to the president and tolerance, if not participation, in corrupt practices, would provide trainers with a viable long-term partner.

An equally acute challenge, however, comes from the declining social and economic situation in the country – ageing infrastructure and the government's failure to address the poverty, unemployment and social alienation of its seven million people. The president's response to events in and around his country indicate that he will continue to look for short-term fixes, not any sweeping changes that might improve a situation that is grim for most people but may also adversely affect his main constituency – the ruling elite.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Maxim Bakiyev, President Bakiyev's son and principal political adviser, Bishkek, late 2009.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interview, Central Asia, January and March 2011. The Pyanj River constitutes much of the border.

¹⁰⁸ The most significant of these took place in the latter years of the Vietnam War, largely under the code names of Salem House and Prairie Fire. See the declassified 1970 annual historical report for the Studies and Observation Group (SOG), of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), www.dod.gov/pubs/foi/reading_room/923.pdf.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, Western official, Dushanbe, 2 April 2011.

V. RAKHMUN: BUSINESS AS USUAL

A. WE DON'T HAVE A PROBLEM

Rakhmon's reaction to the fighting of 2010 and early 2011 was a combination of public nonchalance and private anxiety. He dismissed the idea that events in Egypt or Tunisia could be repeated in his country – citing again the inhibiting effect of the scars left by the civil war. He made a few symbolic proposals, notably calling on the Public Council, a body that has been largely moribund since 1996, to play a more active role in civic life. Yet, he also hinted strongly at a slowdown in the transition to democracy. "An artificial acceleration" of this process would be unwise, he remarked. The country is still in the early stages of this process, he noted. What it needs at the moment is greater consolidation and solidarity.¹¹⁰

The transition to democracy has been barely perceptible. Freedom House has classified Tajikistan as "not free" every year since 1992.¹¹¹ The 2010 State Department human rights report began by describing Tajikistan as "authoritarian", and enumerated a long list of violations, from "restricted right of citizens to change their government" to human trafficking.¹¹² Rakhmon's statement was probably a message to his security authorities, and a broader indication to society, that he was opting for the status quo – and if necessary a tightening of the screws – over change.

Survival is and always has been Rakhmon's overriding concern. His response to any hint of danger is to identify possible threats and neutralise them. Former UTO leaders have learned this, as have many of his own former close associates. The Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) could now be in the line of fire. Several senior figures in or close to the party were targeted during the security emergency: Mannonov in Samsolik, for example, and Alovuddin Davlatov's (Ali Bedaki's) brother, who was an IRP member of the local legislative assembly. Privately senior members of the regime have alleged in briefings to foreign officials in Dushanbe that IRP members were involved, directly

¹¹⁰ CA-News reprinted by The News website, <http://thenews.kz/2011/03/21/768447.html>.

¹¹¹ See "Country Status by Year", at www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=439.

¹¹² "2010 Human Rights Reports: Tajikistan", U.S. State Department, 8 April 2011, at www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/sca/154487.htm. The full list reads: restricted right of citizens to change their government; torture and abuse of detainees and other persons by security forces; impunity for security forces; denial of right to fair trial; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; prohibition of international monitor access to prisons; restrictions on freedoms of speech, press, association, and religion; corruption, which hampered democratic and social reform; violence and discrimination against women; arbitrary arrest; and trafficking in persons.

or indirectly, in a significant number of armed challenges to the regime in 2010.¹¹³ Given recent history, however, any shift by the IRP in the direction of jihadism would represent a dramatic break with the past.¹¹⁴

Pressure on the IRP may be Rakhmon's way of acknowledging that a polarisation of Tajik society is underway. The outward signs of observant Islam are growing perceptibly and rapidly. Even in Dushanbe, streets empty out and traffic is reduced to a trickle at Friday prayers, something that did not happen a few years ago. Several popular singers have abandoned their careers, deeming singing un-Islamic. Mosque-goers report an increasing number of state employees at services. Meanwhile some senior officials who in the past would privately criticise the president on issues such as poverty, corruption or electoral fraud have become ferocious defenders, emphasising in the words of one that "there is no longer a choice in Tajikistan for anyone who wants a secular state – Rakhmon is the only option".¹¹⁵ Yet, the president's response seems guaranteed to exacerbate the situation.

After recalling students from foreign religious institutions, the government failed to find most of them places to study at home. Roughly 1,000 young men are likely, therefore, to join the ranks of the unemployed or migrant labour. Several trials were reported in April 2011 at which parents were prosecuted for sending their children abroad to study, with crippling fines or imprisonment in prospect if convicted.¹¹⁶ A draft law on parental responsibility would

enjoin parents to prevent children and adolescents taking part in "the activities of religious organisations, or organised religion undertakings (excepting funerals)".¹¹⁷ Praying in unregistered places of worship has been banned. When two teenagers under eighteen were found worshipping in an unregistered mosque in Khatlon region, the building was destroyed.¹¹⁸

The government has set a number of short, compulsory themes for the Friday sermon. Several leading Islamic clerics were fired after a review of their qualifications. Meanwhile, the government continues its policy of handing down long sentences on members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, a radical Islamic group that explicitly repudiates violence. The prison terms are often longer than those meted out to armed insurgents.¹¹⁹ It is hard to imagine a series of gov-

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dushanbe, 13 April 2011.

¹¹⁴ During the civil war, the UTO looked to Afghanistan for support and as a base area. Its relations with the Taliban, however, were by its own account both frosty and distant. UTO leader Abdullo Nuri met with the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, just once, a former Nuri aide said. In December 1996, Nuri's plane was forced down over Herat by the Taliban, and Nuri was then invited to travel to Kandahar to meet the Taliban chief, who urged him not to sign a peace agreement with his civil war adversaries and offered assistance in continuing the war. Nuri later made it clear he was unimpressed by Mullah Omar, in particular his knowledge of Islam, the aide recalled: Nuri reportedly remarked that the one-eyed leader was blind in more ways than one. Crisis Group interview, Dushanbe, 7 April 2011. In a 2002 newspaper interview, Nuri remarked that Mullah Omar's level of political knowledge was "below average", while his religious education was "just a little higher", *Asia Plus*, 14 February 2002.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, official, Dushanbe, 5 April 2011.

¹¹⁶ "Таджикистан хочет остаться светским" ["Tajikistan wants to remain secular"], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 15 April 2011, www.ng.ru/cis/2011-04-15/6_tajikistan.html. Sending children to study abroad may indicate a choice in favour of a more Islamic brand of religious education. But it may also be a decision born of economic hardship, in a country where 50-60 per cent of the population lives under the poverty line.

¹¹⁷ The draft law was published on the Avesta news site on 19 January 2011, www.avesta.tj/index.php?newsid=7094. In a long speech on the subject in April 2011, Rakhmon once again touched on the danger of extremism seeping into Tajik society and returned to the threat posed by foreign Islamic educational institutions. "Some parents even send their children illegally to study in foreign states I will state frankly that some of these institutions are engaged in training the youth in extremism and radicalism". "Выступление Президента Республики Таджикистан Эмомали Рахмона на встрече, посвященной обсуждению проекта Закона 'Об ответственности родителей за учебу и воспитание детей'" ["Speech by the president of Tajikistan Emomali Rakhmon at a meeting devoted to discussion of the draft law 'On parental responsibility for the education and upbringing of their children'"], 8 April 2011, www.president.tj/rus/novostee_060411.html.

¹¹⁸ "Tajik authorities demolish unregistered mosque", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 7 April 2011, www.rferl.org/content/tajik_authorities_demolish_unregistered_mosque/3549704.html. A military officer in the same region was later dismissed for sending three soldiers to help build a mosque. "Командир воинской части отправил солдат строить мечеть, и был отстранен от должности" ["The commander of a military unit send soldiers to build a mosque and was removed from his position"], Avesta news site, 21 April 2011, <http://avesta.tj/index.php?newsid=8193>.

¹¹⁹ Thus a group convicted in January 2011 in Dushanbe received terms of sixteen to eighteen years, "В Душанбе осужден предполагаемый амир ячейки «Хизб-ут-тахрир» в Таджикистане", ["Presumed leader of a Hizb ut-Tahrir cell convicted in Dushanbe"], Avesta news site, 22 January 2011, <http://avesta.tj/index.php?newsid=7132>; a group sentenced in Sogd, northern Tajikistan, in April 2011 received terms of fourteen to twenty years. "На севере Таджикистана вынесены приговоры 11 членам Хизб-ут-тахрир" ["In north Tajikistan eleven members of Hizb ut-Tahrir sentenced"], *Asia Plus*, 9 March 2011, <http://news.tj/ru/news/na-severe-tadzhikistana-vyneseny-prigovory-11-chlenam-khizb-ut-takhrir>. By contrast, two men extradited from Afghanistan in 2009 and accused of being members of al-Qaeda received sentences of eight to fifteen years. "Four Tajiks jailed in first al-Qaeda trial", Radio Free

ernment measures which, taken together, would be better designed to provoke a groundswell of outrage.

If the leadership were committed to improving the overall situation, and thus defusing political tensions, it would address some of the disastrous social and economic issues that are slowly destroying the country. Estimates of real unemployment start at 35 per cent; about half the population lives below the poverty line. Up to 50 per cent of the work force are migrant labourers, mostly in Russia. They, not the government, it can be argued, keep the country going, with remittances in 2010 of just over \$2 billion, some 35 per cent of the \$5.7 billion gross national product.¹²⁰

Rather than using the remittances as a security cushion while the government undertakes major reforms, the leadership seems quite content with the status quo. The majority of workers travel on transport owned by members of the ruling elite and send their remittances through banks owned by the same group. The country's riches are meanwhile tightly held in a very few hands. Corruption, in the words of an international observer is "breathhtaking".¹²¹ According to the U.S. embassy in Dushanbe, most of the revenue of the country's main foreign exchange earner, Talco Aluminium, is diverted to a secretive offshore company.¹²² Talco reported a net profit of \$42.9 million in 2010.¹²³

B. THE BORDER, DRUGS, POLITICAL POWER

Despite substantial investments by the EU, the U.S. and others in efforts to improve border controls between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, the main obstacles to illegal crossings in fact are difficult terrain, the height of the Pyanj River in the spring and the absence of a bribe. "From a law enforcement perspective, control of the Tajik-Afghan border (1,387km) is becoming more and more elusive", the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) remarked diplomatically.¹²⁴

In private, senior Western officials admit that this is not a result of incompetence and everyday corruption. They assert that the drug trade is protected and facilitated in Tajikistan at a very high political level.¹²⁵ When contraband drugs reach the Tajikistan side of the Pyanj, a specialist said, it is as if the machinery of state has been mobilised to facilitate its unobstructed passage.¹²⁶ A significant amount of the drugs enter the country through official crossings, diplomats and border watchers believe. Small traders are often arrested – some specialists suspect they are betrayed by drug dealers to help border troops and office law enforcement agencies improve their seizure figures. Large seizures, in trucks or containers, are rare. As the State Department's International Narcotics Control Strategy report puts it: "Tajik law enforcement makes arrests and seizures in mid- to low-level cases The Tajik enforcement authorities, however, apparently are unwilling or unable to target and prosecute major traffickers".¹²⁷

The drug trade is where organised crime, high-level corruption and national security intersect. About 95 metric tons of heroin, one quarter of Afghanistan's output, move through Central Asia annually, the majority by most estimates through Tajikistan. 70 metric tons of this is destined for Russia; 120-130 metric tons of opium take the same route.¹²⁸ Detailed estimates produced by a group of researchers lead them to conclude that "it is unlikely that opiate trafficking adds less than 30 per cent to the recorded GDP". Tajikistan has become a "veritable narco-state", they say, where "a preponderant part of its drug trade is conducted not by common criminals or terrorist groups, but by gangs headed or protected by high-ranking government officials. In no other country of the world, except perhaps contemporary Afghanistan, can such a superimposition between drug traffickers and government officials be found".¹²⁹

The enormous sums generated by the drug trade provide a powerful incentive for influential figures to keep the borders open.¹³⁰ At a time when war is drawing closer to the

Europe/Radio Liberty, 31 August 2009, www.rferl.org/content/Four_Tajiks_Jailed_In_First_Al_Qaeda_Trial/1811133.html.

¹²⁰ "IMF Republic of Tajikistan: Third Review Under the Three-Year Arrangement Under the Extended Credit Facility", www.imf.org/external/pubs/cat/longres.aspx?sk=24522.0, p. 20. Both figures projected for 2010.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interview, senior international observer, Dushanbe, 6 April 2011.

¹²² "The Tajik Aluminium Company (Talco) accounts for most of Tajikistan's exports. Though it is technically state-owned, most of its revenues end up in a secretive offshore company controlled by the President, and the state budget sees little of the income". "TJ Scen setter for Holbrooke", op. cit.

¹²³ Rosinvest.com business website, 8 February 2011, www.rosinvest.com/news/780463/.

¹²⁴ "World Drug Review 2010", op. cit., p. 49.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Washington DC, starting September 2009. The subject has thereafter cropped up regularly, including: Berlin, November 2010; Washington, December 2010; and in meetings with senior diplomats and international officials in various Central Asian capitals, most recently Dushanbe, April 2011.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Tajikistan, April 2010.

¹²⁷ "State Department 2010 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report", U.S. State Department, www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2010/vol1/137199.htm.

¹²⁸ All statistics in this sentence from the "World Drug Review", op. cit.

¹²⁹ L. Paoli, I. Rabkov, V. Greenfield, P. Reuter, "Tajikistan: The Rise of a Narco-state", *J. Drug Issues* 38 (4), 2007, pp. 951-978.

¹³⁰ The wholesale Tajikistan heroin price in 2009 was \$3 per gram, according to UNODC. By the time it reached Russia, the

Pyanj River, the government shows no urgency in addressing the border issue. Meanwhile, the corruption spawned by the border operations is having “a trickle down effect”, said a Western security specialist. “The big guys are getting money for drugs, so the little ones pick up the crumbs. They will take payoffs from anyone else who wants to cross. Or they will not enforce security because no one cares And the police at checkpoints from the border leading into the rest of the country will do the same”.¹³¹ One illustration of the languor with which the border is controlled can be found in the State Department’s 2010 report. In the first nine months of 2009, Tajik border troops – with a guerrilla war on one side and a fairly significant arms black market on the other – confiscated 46 firearms, including 26 submachine guns, thirteen carbines, and one machine-gun.¹³²

C. THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The international donor community, as is so often the case, is divided in its reading of the situation. Some insist that aid still has a purpose and can improve the harsh daily lives of most Tajiks, albeit at the price of a “certain leakage”,¹³³ as an international civil servant put it. Some foreign observers also exhibit a degree of condescension towards Central Asia. A senior international figure recalled the scandal surrounding the National Bank of Tajikistan (NBT) in late 2007, when top bank officials admitted that the country’s reserves had been used to cover private foreign bank loans. At least the official involved showed initiative, he remarked, even if it was the wrong sort.¹³⁴ One of the problems besetting aid operations in Tajikistan and elsewhere in the region is the pressure on countries, embassies and organisations to disburse the full amount of allocated aid, whether or not there are genuine opportunities to absorb it. Such a self-referential approach has not done much to improve the situation in Tajikistan.

Faced with an increasingly unpredictable situation, the international community has limited options. It can continue as usual, providing aid in full awareness that much will be lost to corruption, and then pleading if anything happens that there was no alternative to dealing with the prevailing administration. Following regime change, the

international community could then try to pick up where it left off. China and Russia would probably do this in any case. The other option would be to pressure the Rakhmon regime to embark on the long process of changing its behaviour. To do this now, the international community would both need to use political pressure and be willing to use aid as a lever. It should also be prepared, in extremis, to take other more radical measures, such as freezing top leaders’ international bank accounts.

Conditional aid should be the norm, replacing disburse-or-die as the main imperative. Demanding assistance be used as intended is hardly unwarranted interference or neo-imperialism, and donors should be encouraged to modulate aid according to performance. Aid to such prized areas as budgetary support should only be given in return for clear undertakings regarding its use. These should routinely include meticulous monitoring, with public praise for efficiency and swift sanctions for misuse. Conditionality could also take the form of ring-fencing institutions that, with time and protection, might make a lasting difference to the political system. The most obvious would be an independent judiciary.

Major international players should be encouraged to seek ways to bring about change. Foreign leaders need to keep up a steady drumbeat of pressure on the regime: urging it to crack down on high-level corruption, for example, and guarantee freedom of speech and religion. Given that foreign aid to Tajikistan at this point does little more than keep the country barely afloat, a thorough rethink of its rationale would be a pragmatic, not a radical, measure.

price was \$45/gm. An average of five metric tons of heroin is seized annually in Central Asia. “World Drug Review 2010”, op. cit.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interview, Western security specialist, Dushanbe, March 2010.

¹³² “2010 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report”, op. cit.

¹³³ Crisis Group interview, Brussels, 25 October 2010.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Dushanbe, 11 April 2011. For further details on the NBT scandal, see Crisis Group Report, *Tajikistan: On the Road to Failure*, op. cit.

VI. CONCLUSION

Events in Tunisia and Egypt have destroyed the fallacy that one can predict the survival or collapse of an authoritarian state. The April 2010 overthrow of the Bakiyev regime in Kyrgyzstan confirms that such changes can take place in Central Asia, whatever regional leaders might claim. The best one can say about Tajikistan at this juncture is that it is deeply vulnerable to any form of stress – social, economic or security – even more so even than neighbours like Kyrgyzstan. It is poorer than its neighbours, its infrastructure more degraded, its economy the most moribund and its political establishment among the most corrupt. Its military and security forces amply demonstrated their weaknesses in the Rasht valley. Its proximity to Afghanistan heightens the threat to its security. If Tajikistan succumbs to any one of these stresses, the effect on neighbours could be profound.

The Rakhmon administration seems to be opting for short-term fixes. The president's Machiavellian deal with former Colonel Akhmadov in Rasht could well backfire, either as a result of the deep animosity that Rakhmon's own power ministers nourish for Akhmadov, or because the colonel himself could decide he is better off in another alliance. The regime shows no inclination to seek common ground with its emerging Muslim majority, or to address the fundamental social and economic issues that are dragging the bulk of its population further into abject poverty. It is, as foreign observers admit in moments of quiet candour, profoundly resistant to reform.

Western countries are clearly concerned that excessive pressure on the Rakhmon regime could jeopardise their major interest in the country: over-flights for the international coalition in Afghanistan. Tajikistan, too, has a number of pressure points, however, and they are as vital to Rakhmon as over-flights are to the coalition. The most direct one is money, something the regime always says it needs – even if the ruling elite does not seem to be lacking for anything.

Another pressure point, highly important for an authoritarian regime, is the credibility that flows from being treated as a valued partner by major global players. The image of the ruler is particularly important for regimes where credibility is not bestowed by the ballot box. The diplomatic niceties uttered to the president by high-ranking Western visitors may be perceived by those offering them as little more than fluff. But the words are highly valuable to leaders like President Rakhmon. Such statements engender a sense of inevitability about the leader's hold on power. Leaders like to cherry pick from them. In the future they should contain fewer cherries and more emphasis on pressing issues.

Aid should be used to encourage and reward behaviour: non-interference in the efforts to create a functioning independent judiciary, for example, dialogue with any Islamist groups who publicly reject violence to achieve their ends, genuinely free elections or an end to harassment of the media. If the leadership refuses to cooperate – which in this case may well be tantamount to opening the way to the IMU or other armed insurgent groups – the international community may have to reach for a more painful weapon. It should deploy forensic accountants and lawyers and investigate the widely reputed leadership bank accounts in places like the British Virgin Islands.¹³⁵

There are, of course, opposing arguments – that Tajikistan will never progress much beyond the state it is in now, for example. If this is the case, donors should move on. Or that assistance can still do some good, but at the price of “a certain leakage” – not the best way to mobilise taxpayers behind international aid. In particular, donors have to move away from their own internal cynicism. Aid officials often admit in private, but rarely in public, that they are driven by the imperative to disburse in full the sum allocated to a given country or program, regardless of whether the project is viable or desirable. Instead, their criteria need to be based on helping the country survive in a wild, unpredictable part of the world.

Bishkek/Brussels, 24 May 2011

¹³⁵“Nations in Transit 2009”, Freedom House, states that “[a]lthough aluminium is produced and exported by the state-owned Tajik Aluminium Company (Talco), the industry also features several nontransparent intermediary companies, including CDH, which is registered in the British Virgin Islands”, www.freedomhouse.eu/images/nit2009/tajikistan.pdf. The U.S. State Department's 2010 Human Rights Report on Tajikistan, op. cit., notes that “TALCO's offshore management company, which is reportedly owned by senior politicians, agreed to undergo its own audit, but the results were not released at year's end”.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF TAJIKISTAN



Map No. 3765 Rev. 11 UNITED NATIONS
 October 2009

Department of Field Support
 Cartographic Section