American Foreign Policy Council

Tajikistan

Quick Facts

Population: 8,330,946 (July 2016 est.)

Area: 144,100 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Tajik 84.3%, Uzbek 13.8% (Includes Lakai, Kongrat, Katagan, Barlos, Yuz), other 2% (Includes Kyrgyz, Russian, Turkmen, Tatar, Arab) (2010 est.)

Religions: Sunni Muslim 85%, Shi'a Muslim 5%, other 10% (2003 est.)

Government Type: Presidential Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): $6.612 (2015 est.)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (January 2017)

Overview

The poorest of Central Asia's former Soviet republics, Tajikistan is precariously situated along the lawless northeastern border of Afghanistan and straddles the southern and western ends of the restive Ferghana Valley. The end of Soviet state atheism led to what, to many, appeared to be a sudden reemergence of Islam in the public sphere, much as was the case in other newly independent republics. However, uniquely among the former Soviet bloc, Tajikistan was the site of all out civil war that pitted former communists against opposition forces that included Islamists.

While the civil war came to a close in the late 1990s, sporadic violence has persisted and fears remain that Tajikistan could return to instability. Economic stagnation, a precarious geo-political position and poor political management are all potential factors that could fuel a sudden revival of Islamist militancy. Despite heavy-handed measures aimed at curbing the dangers posed by jihadists and other anti-state movements, sporadic violence has demonstrated the ability of Islamists to survive, and Tajikistan may well prove to be a springboard for further Islamic militancy should the Tajik government make any serious mistakes.

Islamist Activity

More than any other of the newly independent Central Asian republics, Tajikistan became the scene of intense social conflict and violence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the other regional states, the transition was not without challenges—particularly in Uzbekistan, where Islamists briefly took over parts of the Ferghana valley. Yet in Tajikistan, political transition led to outright civil war. Elections in 1991 favored the entrenched communist-era political elite, comprised mainly of *apparatchiks* from the Khujand region. A broad-based coalition of opposition groups which would come to be known as the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) challenged these results, and fighting broke out in early 1992.

The UTO consisted of several different groups with wildly different aims and ambitions: separatists from the ethnically distinct Pamir region, secularists with liberal tendencies, and Islamists. The latter rose to prominence during the course of the fighting, coalescing into the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). The war raged for five years as the government vied with the opposition for control of the mountainous country, and attracted support from neighboring Uzbekistan and factions in war-torn Afghanistan, as well as from Russia.

In 1997, a peace deal was brokered by the UN and signed by Emomali Rahmonov (today known by Rahmon, having abandoned the Russified version of his name) and Sayid Abdullah Nuri, head of the IRPT, on behalf of the UTO. This agreement ended the civil war and granted the UTO, by this point consisting mainly of the IRPT, a 30 percent share in the government of Tajikistan. The IRPT became the only legal Islamist party in former Soviet Central Asia. Nevertheless, the group's willingness to compromise with secularists and the central government was seen by many as a kind of betrayal of its core principles, and would have to struggle to remain relevant.

In this endeavor, the IRPT had to compete with rival Islamist movements that rose to challenge the credentials it forged during the civil war, while at the same time struggling to maintain power as an official opposition force. In its stead, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (*HuT*), began to take over the role of the premier Islamist movement in the country. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, HuT was able to mobilize elements of the Tajikistani population to advance its calls for the supposedly non-violent overthrow of the Tajik government.[1]

Contact with the political system, coupled with competition with other more overtly anti-establishment Islamist movements, cost the IRPT popular support in Tajikistan. In parallel, Rahmon's efforts to consolidate power in a manner similar to other regional states led to the gradual undoing of the power-sharing agreement that ended the civil war. Against the backdrop of the rise of the Islamic State and a worsening of the insurgency in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of American troops, the stage was set for Dushanbe's political elite to move against what until then had been Central Asia's only non-proscribed Islamist opposition parties. In the nearly two decades

following the cessation of hostilities, Rahmon's People's Democratic Party (PDP) has been able to consolidate its power, while the IRPT, by contrast, lost many of its erstwhile allies in the struggle to maintain a foothold in the political system. At the same time, the geopolitical realities in neighboring Afghanistan have shifted, and the IRPT can no longer draw on reliable allies from across the border.

During a contested election in March 2015, the IRPT proved unable to maintain its foothold in the country's parliamentary system. Alleging intimidation, election fraud, and other irregularities, the IRPT challenged the outcome of the elections. The newly strengthened Tajik government rapidly proceeded to crack down on the party's leadership, charging its members with violating various anti-extremist laws. An armed clash between deputy defense minister Abduhalim Nazarzoda and his supporters and the Tajik police left 26 people dead in September 2015.[2] In the wake of the violence, the government was quick to arrest the leadership of the party, and in February 2016, nine members of the IRPT leadership went on trial for conspiring with Nazarzoda to overthrow the government.[3]

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Splinter Groups

Despite its name, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) was active beyond the borders of Uzbekistan in the late 1990s. Having emerged in the Ferghana Valley in the wake of Soviet collapse, the movement was forced out of Uzbek territory and set itself up in Tajikistan during the civil war, where it took up arms in support of the UTO. In 1999, the group launched a series of raids into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, engaging police and military units and raising funds through kidnappings. Ultimately the group retreated into Afghanistan, and became embedded in the Taliban's attempts to consolidate its hold over the northern part of the country. During the U.S.-led post-9/11 intervention, the IMU sided with the Taliban, which resulted in the death of its leader, Juma Namangani, and a hasty withdrawal into the tribal areas along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan.[4]

Languishing in Pakistani exile, the IMU shifted its efforts away from directly opposing national governments in Central Asia to becoming specialists firmly entrenched in the world of international terrorism. The highly literate Central Asians, with a history of technical and scientific expertise, are prized throughout the *jihadist* milieu as expert bomb makers. But not until 2010 did the group reemerge in Tajikistan, when it was implicated in the jailbreak of 25 imprisoned Islamists that August and a subsequent attack on Tajik security forces in the Rasht Valley, as well as a car bombing in the northern city of Khujand.[5]

Token attacks notwithstanding, the IMU is a mere shadow of its former self in Central Asia.[6] The group has been confined mainly to Afghanistan and Pakistan in recent years, and was further weakened when the its leader, Usman Ghazi, denounced the Taliban and swore an oath of loyalty to the self-styled *caliph* of the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS), Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In subsequent clashes with the Taliban, what was left of the IMU was severely weakened, and Usman Ghazi himself likely was killed. However, a surviving faction of the IMU that remains loyal to the Taliban

has reconstituted itself, and appears to be taking part in battles against the Afghan government.[7] Other IMU fighters have gathered in Syria under the umbrella of the Imam Bukhari Brigade, which is loyal to al-Qaeda. As the Taliban insurgency shifts into the northern part of Afghanistan, IMU fighters with their avowed hostility toward the secular governments of Central Asia are again coming closer to the border of Tajikistan, and it is not inconceivable that their attention may again be directed at the country in the future.

Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT)

Hizb ut-Tahrir is unusual because of its agenda of establishing a *caliphate* which unites all Muslims in a single entity by peaceful means, though it remains unclear exactly how this transformation would be brought about without the use of force. Entering Central Asia in the late 1990s, the movement quickly gained in influence as the IRPT and IMU declined in popularity. The IRPT had lost its credibility among Islamists as an Islamic people's movement because of its participation in government, while the IMU fought alongside the Taliban against the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan and was all but destroyed in late 2001.

HuT spread its message for Islamic solidarity and an overthrow of the Tajik government through a leaflet campaign which portrayed the country's economic and development woes as a result of secular government. Calls for reform through religion found resonance within both the Tajik and minority Uzbek communities. Despite the group's avowed commitment to non-violence, Central Asian leaderships saw the HuT as an existential threat, and in Tajikistan the movement was declared an "illegal political party" in 1999. This was followed up by a crackdown on alleged members, 500 of whom were arrested between 2000 and 2005.[8]

Since then, HuT has gone underground, and it is difficult to assess how real the presence of the movement is today. In an increasingly anti-Islamist political environment, especially following the 2009 passing of a national "Law on the Freedom of Conscience" that included restrictions on religious communities and religious literature,[9] the movement has likely taken a defensive line and reduced its public profile. While HuT has received the most attention of any organized clandestine group in Central Asia, it is extremely difficult to gauge how many adherents remain within the country and how actively they are proselytizing.[10] It should be noted that while the ascendance of HuT in Central Asia gave birth to a cottage industry of ominous analysis in the West in the 2000s, little has been written on the organization since 2011. Both the Tajik government and HuT itself have an interest in maintaining the appearance of a HuT presence in Tajikistan—but it remains unclear to what extent the movement is still active in Central Asia.

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

The civil war in Syria and the ongoing turmoil in Iraq have contributed to the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). With a highly sophisticated propaganda network and strong social media profile, the self-styled *caliphate* quickly be-

came the focus of international media and political rhetoric. With the amount of attention being lavished upon the group, it is perhaps unsurprising that the movement became the focal point of international *jihadist* ambitions. A December 2015 study estimated that between 27,000 and 31,000 people hailing from over 100 countries had opted to become foreign fighters in the ranks of *jihadist* organizations, primarily in Iraq and Syria.[11]

Disturbing as these numbers may be, the number of foreign fighters originating in Central Asia, estimated at ca, 2,000, is comparatively low. According to a report by the Soufan Group, some 386 Tajiks are thought to have traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight for ISIS, compared to about 300 people from Sweden.[12] Furthermore, most Central Asian recruits are known to have been radicalized in Russia, not in their home countries.[13] Nevertheless, Tajik officials have focused on ISIS as a threat to their government, with some justification. In April 2015, Colonel Gulmurod Khalimov, a senior Tajik counterterrorism official trained in the U.S., disappeared, only to reappear in an ISIS propaganda video denouncing the Tajik government and threatening to bring *jihad* to the U.S. and Russia.[14]

Revealingly, Khalimov's propaganda performance included an appeal to Tajik migrants in Russia to rise up against their Russian employers and join the Islamic State. Despite efforts by various Islamist organizations, including ISIS, to win Central Asian recruits for *jihad*, these efforts have so far proven to be relatively ineffective, with far more volunteers coming from Western Europe and the Middle East. The one Central Asian population group which appears to be most vulnerable to *jihadist* propaganda are guest workers in Russia, who are often confronted with difficult living situations, are isolated from the stabilizing influence of their families and local religious leaders, and exposed to overt xenophobia and racism.[15]

Islamism and Society

Decades of rule by Moscow left undeniable traces in the languages, cultures and social lives of people in Central Asia. In Part of this legacy is that the Muslim populations in Tajikistan are far less prone to political Islamism than their coreligionists in the other places, like the Arab world. Tajikistan is mostly Sunni, while the small Pamiri communities in the east of the country belong to the Ismaili branch of Shi'a Islam. It is far more common to see alcohol or pork on the menu of restaurants in Dushanbe than it would be in Cairo or Baghdad. Central Asian Muslims have also been heavily influenced by the *Hanafi* School of jurisprudence, which has historically been more amenable to secular government. That being said, the end of communism has led to a reentry of Islam into Central Asian society. Especially in Tajikistan, public religiosity has reappeared in the public sphere, with religious-minded names and clothing styles becoming increasingly prominent.[16]

Tajikistan has seen a more rapid growth of Islamic sensitivities than its northern neighbors. There are several reasons for the heightened level of Islamic solidarity in Tajikistan. Most obviously, the instability of the 1990s gradually made the IRPT the

dominant force in the UTO, while liberal or democratic minded opposition forces disappeared over time from leadership roles in a situation analogous to the one we see in Syria today. As a result, Islamist groups gained a foothold during the civil war, the results of which remain to this day.

Independence in Tajikistan was characterized by widespread poverty and the phenomenon of mass labor migration. Some estimates place the number of Tajiks leaving the country for employment in Kazakhstan and Russia at well over a million, which in a country of just under 8 million inhabitants is a staggering number. The biggest exodus took place during the civil war in the 1990s, but the lack of economic opportunity has ensured a steady stream of Tajik migrants down to the present. Indeed, in 2015 the World Bank classified Tajikistan as the country in the world most dependent on remittances, which exceeded 50 percent of GDP.[17] This is in part due to geographic and historical features; Tajikistan's mountainous landscape makes development initiatives difficult, and during Soviet times the country was kept more or less on life support by Moscow, which provided up to a 30 percent of the republic's budget in subsidies. A kleptocratic approach to economic reform has exacerbated existing problems and further undermined faith in state institutions.[18]

In 2008 and 2009, the economic woes of the population came to a head in what has been referred to as Tajikistan "winter crisis." An especially cold year completely overstrained Tajikistan's ageing energy infrastructure, leaving much of the population at the mercy of the elements. Rural areas were especially hard hit, with local people attempting to heat their homes by burning furniture and taking to the thinly wooded (and erosion prone) mountainsides in a desperate search for fuel. Against the backdrop of government assurances that gas and electricity were plentiful, this crisis widened the gap between the state elites and the population at large.

Economic troubles did not end with the spring, however, as in 2009 Tajikistan saw a slowdown in its remittance-based economy. Dependence on the Russian economy has also meant that the Tajik economy has suffered anew in recent years from the after-effects of economic stagnation in Russia, which were first caused by sanctions over Russian aggression toward Georgia in 2008, and since exacerbated by its aggressive foreign policy toward Ukraine. For Tajikistan, this has meant a return-exodus of migrant workers, many of whom have been away for several years.[19]

The Rahmon government has taken only limited measures to combat the issues of poverty and labor migration. Popular resentment has been stoked by the efforts of the government to demonstrate its power through costly public projects, such as the almost quixotic construction of the world's tallest flagpole in 2011 at a cost of $30 million. At the same time that this extravagant prestige project was being developed, the cost of basic commodities within the country spiked, starkly illustrating the disconnect between Dushanbe's priorities and the population at large.[20] More disturbing

has been the tendency of the Rahmon regime to narrow rather than broaden its base, relying almost exclusively on the loyalty of a small group of officials hailing from the President's home district of Danghara in Khatlon province.

At the same time, the government has sought to crack down on Islamists, exerting considerable effort to pursue and neutralize suspected terrorists. Following a major prison break in Dushanbe in 2010, during the course of which some 25 convicted militants escaped, Tajik security forces launched what amounted to a military occupation of the Rasht Valley, a hub of Islamist opposition. Between September 2010 and November 2011, some 100 people lost their lives in this operation, and all 25 escapees were either killed or recaptured. Half a decade later, in 2015, similar clashes between security forces and militants in Dushanbe and the town of Vakhdat led to another major crackdown.[21]

Entrenched economic instability and the rise of ISIS's self-styled *caliphate* in Syria and Iraq have conspired to make Islamism more attractive to disenfranchised youth wishing to express political frustrations and counteract a feeling of powerlessness. This is especially acute among the Tajik guest worker population in Russia, which is subject to xenophobic discrimination, difficult living conditions and isolation from family and community ties. At the same time, the operational capacity of Islamists in Northern Afghanistan is increasing due to the most recent incarnation of that nation's interminable civil war. Combined with an uncertain economic future and growing disillusion with the Rahmon government, these developments create conditions in which radical Islamism retains the potential to be a significant threat to Dushanbe's authority.

Islamism and the State

In recent years, the Tajik government has further intensified existing policies to crack down on suspected Islamists. Citing the dangers of terrorism, the government has sought to limit expressions of religion in the public sphere.[22] The list of proscribed religious movements has steadily grown longer to include the *Hizb ut Tahrir* (banned in 1999), the ostensibly apolitical *Tablighi Jama'at* (banned in 2006) and most recently the IRPT itself. President Rahmon's government even went so far as to ban *Salafism* itself in 2009.[23] Critics argue that what the government claims to be counter-terrorism measures are in actuality merely an attempt to break any form of realistic opposition. The Tajik government has used the accusation of Islamic extremism liberally, including against secular oppositional forces including the "24 Group", whose leader (and former Rahmon business ally) Umarali Quvvatovwas assassinated in Istanbul in March 2015. At the same time, the state has also taken steps to monitor non-political religious gatherings and passed legislation to prevent the religious education of children under the age of 18. Such efforts culminated in the 2011 ban on the presence of children at Friday services in mosques, and punitive measures that were taken against the parents of underage violators.[24]

The heavy-handedness of some of these measures exceeds the norm in Central Asia, and has prompted a response from the international community, and Tajikistan's policies in the area of religion have been criticized by bodies such as the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. In part due to this pressure, President Rahmon's government has in the past made concessions, such as repealing some of the stricter prohibitions on religious education.[25] Nevertheless, critics argue that Dushanbe runs the risk of alienating sections of the moderately religious population and galvanizing opposition. Considering the precarious nature of the Tajik economy, which is highly dependent on remittances from guest workers in Russia, a gradual shift northward of the activities of the Taliban and their allies in nearby Afghanistan, and the disappearance of the IRPT as a valve for opposition sentiment, the future of Tajikistan's struggle against radical Islamism will remain fraught with challenges.

Endnotes

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