



TAJIKISTAN

Quick Facts

Population: 8,873,669 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 144,100 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Tajik 84.3% (includes Pamiri and Yagnobi), Uzbek 13.8%, other 2% (includes Kyrgyz, Russian, Turkmen, Tatar, Arab) (2014 est.)

Government Type: Presidential republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$7.144 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated August 2020)

INTRODUCTION

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 official Soviet state atheism led to a reemergence of political Islam. 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.

Sporadic violence persisted after the civil war's end in the late 1990s, and some fear that Tajikistan could once again become unstable. Economic stagnation, a precarious geopolitical position, and poor political management are factors that could fuel a sudden revival of Islamist militancy. Despite measures aimed at curbing jihadists and other anti-state movements, both have persisted. Tajikistan may well prove to be a springboard for further Islamic militancy should authorities continue serving corporate interests, keep the government closed to public control, and fail to hold officials accountable for their misdeeds.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Tajikistan was a center of political Islam in the secular Soviet Union during the Cold War. In the late 1970s, an underground group of young Islamists emerged in Southern Tajikistan. They formed the core of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) that was established in October 1990.¹ During the first decade of its existence, the IRPT was involved in violent *jihad* against what it considered “apostates and communists.” In 1991, the IRPT formed a coalition bloc that consisted of several different groups with vastly different aims and ambitions. The bloc included a separatist movement from the ethnically distinct Pamir region populated by followers of the Aga Khan's branch of Shi'a Islam, as well as movements and parties representing Tajik secularists with nationalist and liberal tendencies.²

Presidential elections in November 1991 favored the entrenched communist-era political elite, com-

prised mainly of apparatchiks from the northern Leninabad (currently Sughd) province that won 56.9% of the vote.³ The opposition challenged these results, and fighting broke out in early 1992.⁴ The IRPT formed the Fatherland Liberation Front to coordinate its armed struggle against the forces of a pro-Communist Popular Front, which allowed Islamists to rise to prominence.⁵ The war raged for five years, as the government attracted support from neighboring Uzbekistan and Russia in its fight against its domestic opposition. Tajik opposition leaders escaped primarily to Afghanistan, Russia, and Iran following their defeat in November 1992.⁶ A UN facilitated peace process began in April 1994. During peace talks, the opposition formed a unified, IRPT-dominated coalition called the United Tajik Opposition (UTO).⁷ Other members of the UTO included the Democratic Party of Tajikistan (DPT), as well as the Rastokhez (Rebirth) and Lali Badakhstan (Ruby of Badakshan) parties. Relations between the Tajik government and Islamism were not discussed during this three year negotiation. In June 1997, a peace deal was brokered by the UN and signed by Emomali Rahmonov and Sayid Abdullah Nuri, head of the IRPT, on behalf of the UTO. This agreement ended the civil war and granted the UTO a 30% share in the Tajik government.⁸ Although secularism remained central to Tajikistan's constitution, the IRPT became the first legally-recognized Islamist party in the former Soviet Union.⁹

Some dissident Islamists continued terrorist activities between 1997 and 2001.¹⁰ Yet, the only significant political or terror attacks between 2001 and 2009 were sporadic assassination attempts on Kyrgyz and Uzbek politicians. Over the past dozen years or so, however, Islamist groups have taken on a comparatively higher profile. In 2009, former opposition field commander Mullo Abdullo and a number of affiliated fighters returned from the Afghanistan-Pakistan area to Tajikistan,¹¹ and the following year saw a new wave of instability when a group of 25 prisoners escaped from the State National Security Committee's (SNSC) detention center in Dushanbe. Escapees included the brother of Mirzo Ziyoev, a commander in the Islamist opposition forces during the 1992-1997 civil war, as well as members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).¹² Subsequently, in September, two suicide bombers hit the police station in Tajikistan's northern capital, Khujand, killing two and injuring 26. The Tajik interior ministry blamed the attack on IMU members.¹³ In the resulting government operation, Abdullo and his men were killed, marking a notable milestone for Tajik authorities.¹⁴

Since 2010, global concern about Islamic extremist groups has offered the Tajik government an opportunity to strengthen its campaign against the IRPT. IRPT's decline in popularity ahead of the 2015 parliamentary elections led to the party losing its two seats in Parliament.¹⁵ The party urged the Ministry of Interior to investigate the government's continuous persecution of its members, but received no response.¹⁶ An armed clash between gunmen supported by deputy defense minister and former UTO commander Abduhalim Nazarzoda and the Tajik police left 26 people dead in September 2015.¹⁷ Soon thereafter, the Tajik government declared the IRPT an extremist group, arrested 14 of its senior members, and banned it from participating in Tajik politics.¹⁸

Some observers have speculated that the alleged insurgency was used by the Tajik government as a pretext to suppress remnants of the opposition.¹⁹ Some arrested IRPT leaders, apparently under pressure from the police and security officers, made public statements against the party, blaming the IRPT and linked it to the Iranian government.²⁰ The government also charged opposition members with propagating Shi'ism in Tajikistan.²¹ In 2018, two major terrorist acts took place in Tajikistan. On July 30, a terrorist attack in Danghara left four Western cyclists dead and two others injured. The government rushed to shift blame for the incident onto the IRPT,²² but five of the attackers pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) in a video released following the attack and, soon afterwards, IS itself claimed responsibility for the incident.²³ Nevertheless, Tajik authorities downplayed IS's involvement, instead blaming the IRPT and Iran, albeit without presenting any evidence.²⁴

Subsequently, on November 7, 2018, some 50 prisoners and two guards were killed during a riot in a prison for inmates convicted of terrorism, extremism, and other serious crimes in Khujand. The violence

started after a suspected IS affiliated inmate attacked a guard and seized his assault rifle.²⁵ IS claimed responsibility for the riot,²⁶ but human rights activists and opponents of the Tajik government believe that the violence had nothing to do with the terror group, instead ascribing the unrest to poor living conditions in the facility and larger injustices in the Tajik prison system.²⁷ An estimated 150 people were killed in that riot, which was suppressed by authorities using tactics widely deemed unprofessional and inhumane.²⁸

As of Summer 2020, Tajik police and security services continue to crack down on political Islam by targeting IRPT leaders and threatening their family members.²⁹ The State Committee for National Security of Tajikistan, in cooperation with their Russian colleagues, have detained and forcibly returned numerous opposition activists from Russia to Tajikistan.³⁰ Likewise, a former IRPT activist was deported from Russia to Tajikistan soon after his arrest in December 2018.³¹

Political marginalization, defamation, and violent assaults have paralyzed the IRPT in Tajikistan. Kabiri still leads the party from Europe, where he enjoys political refugee status. The IRPT is not classified as a terrorist group by the United States, and its members continue their activities in Europe. In March 2018, Interpol removed Kabiri from its wanted list. Kabiri attends various conferences and uses social networking services to confer with various audiences.³²

The international community has reacted with silence to the brutal crushing of the opposition in Tajikistan. The UN, the guarantor of the 1997 inter-Tajik peace agreement, did not include the issue on the international agenda. The EU and the U.S., meanwhile, continue to support Tajikistan with millions in military aid to back its anti-terrorist efforts.

However, if the IRPT does not currently constitute a direct security challenge to the Tajik state, other Islamist groups in the country have posed, and some continue to pose, a clear threat to Tajik security.

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and splinter groups

The fortune of Uzbek Islamists sharply differs from their Tajik co-religionists. IMU began as a relatively peaceful Islamic movement but, by 1992-1993, took steps to forcibly introduce Islamic rule into the Fergana Valley. Persecuted by the Uzbek regime, most of the IMU's activists left for Tajikistan where they fought alongside Tajik Islamists against the secular government from 1992 to 1996.³³ The Taliban's capture of Kabul in September 1996 provided further incentive for the Tajik peace process, as Russia, Iran and Uzbekistan did not want exiled Tajik Islamists to become part of radical Islamist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan.³⁴ The IRPT, encouraged by Iran, rejected a pro-Taliban course in favor of Tajik nationalism and returned to Tajikistan. The IMU, having been deprived of political participation in Uzbekistan and finding no place in reconciled Tajikistan, instead joined Taliban and al-Qaeda.³⁵

The IMU is now a mere shadow of its former self in Central Asia, largely confined to Afghanistan and Pakistan.³⁶ It was further weakened in September 2015 when its leader, Usman Ghazi, denounced the Taliban and pledged allegiance to IS *emir* Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.³⁷ In subsequent clashes with the Taliban, what was left of the IMU was severely weakened, and Usman Ghazi himself was likely killed.

Another IMU splinter group that joined IS, known as Katibat al-Imam al-Bukhari (KIB), is the largest Uzbek fighting force in Syria, and is loyal to al-Qaeda. It operates in both Syria and Afghanistan. Abu Yusuf Muhojir, an Uzbek militant from Tajikistan, leads the group. The U.S. State Department lists KIB as a specially designated global terrorist organization. Some sources believe that the IMU is responsible for the July 2018 attack on Western bikers in Danghara.³⁸

After the killing of IMU leader Usman Ghazi by the Taliban in December 2015, no replacement has been publicly identified. As of Summer 2020, no evidence can be found to suggest that the IMU remains active; its small fractions and splinter groups have weakened and no longer threaten regional stability.³⁹

Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT)

Hizb ut-Tahrir's goal is to promote the Islamic way of life and Islamic teachings to the world via *dawa* (proselytization).⁴⁰ The movement gained influence in Tajikistan in the late 1990s, as the IRPT and IMU declined in popularity.⁴¹

Despite the group's avowed commitment to non-violence, Central Asian governments have viewed HuT as an existential threat and acted accordingly. In 2001, the movement was officially declared an "illegal political party" in Tajikistan. 500 HuT members were subsequently arrested there between 2000 and 2005.⁴² The Supreme Court of Tajikistan formally labeled the group an extremist organization in March 2008.⁴³ Since then, HuT has gone underground. The political environment is increasingly secular, exemplified by the passage of the "Law on the Freedom of Conscience" (LFC), which includes restrictions on religious communities and literature.⁴⁴

Because of the law, HuT chooses to maintain a low profile. While the group has received attention, it is extremely difficult to gauge how many adherents of the group remain within the country and how actively they are proselytizing.⁴⁵ In June 2011, Sharifjon Yoqubov, the alleged leader of HuT, was arrested by *Tajik* police.⁴⁶ Both the Tajik government and HuT seek to maintain the appearance of a HuT presence in Tajikistan, but their actual level of activity is unclear.

HuT is not a political party. It has neither a political agenda nor a desire to participate in national politics. Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan consider the evolution and ongoing activities of HuT to be a threat to their security and have opted for a policy of strict repression vis-à-vis the group and its followers. HuT is not involved in international terrorism, but the group's radical anti-Christian and anti-Semitic ideology is sympathetic to anti-Western violence. The IRPT, for its part, has not joined calls for the suppression of HuT, but shares the government's view on the illegality of the group.⁴⁷

Islamic State (IS)

According to recent estimates, former Soviet countries served the largest source of foreign fighters in the Syria/Iraq conflict – more so even than neighboring states in the Middle East. Roughly 4,200 Central Asians are estimated to have joined IS and other terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq.⁴⁸ Tajik authorities claim that, as of late 2018, only 76 of the 1,899 Tajik citizens fighting for ISIS abroad have returned home voluntarily.⁴⁹ Despite – or perhaps because of – the significant defeats faced by IS in Syria and Iraq, the Tajik government remains deeply concerned about the threat posed by IS.⁵⁰ Such worries are not merely regarding physical violence; a number of notable Tajik militants have been radicalized by *jihadist* propaganda in Russia.⁵¹ Most prominently, in April 2015, Colonel Gulmurod Khalimov, a U.S.-trained senior Tajik counterterrorism official, appeared in an IS propaganda video denouncing the Tajik government and threatening to bring *jihad* to the U.S. and Russia.⁵² Khalimov's propaganda performance included an appeal to Tajik migrants in Russia to rise up against their Russian employers and join IS. Russian guest workers in Central Asia are especially vulnerable to radicalization, as they are often confronted with difficult living situations, isolated from the stabilizing influence of their families and local religious leaders, and exposed to overt xenophobia and racism.⁵³

In July 2018, "soldiers of the Islamic state" attacked seven cycling tourists in a hit-and-run styled knife attack. Four of the tourists were killed, two were injured, and one escaped uninjured. In the resulting investigation, four suspects were killed by Tajik security forces. They also detained the suspected cell leader, Hussein Abdusamadov, and arrested five people suspected of having knowledge of the attack.⁵⁴ Abdusamadov died in prison in March 2020.⁵⁵

Since mid-2019, two violent terrorism-related events have taken place in Tajikistan. On 19 May 2019, three prison guards and 29 inmates, including several opposition members, were killed in a riot that broke out in a maximum-security prison in the Vahdat district. While Tajik authorities declared that 17 of the slain inmates were members of the Islamic State and three from the IRPT, these claims cannot be independently proved.⁵⁶ Another terrorist act took place on November 6, 2019. 20 militants attacked a

checkpoint on the Tajikistan-Uzbekistan border in the Ishqobod area near Dushanbe. 15 of the attackers were killed and five others were captured at the scene. Four border guards and police officers were killed. Tajik authorities claim that assailants, being mostly citizens of Tajikistan's north, entered Tajikistan on November 3, traveling from Afghanistan.⁵⁷ On November 7, IS claimed responsibility for the attack.⁵⁸ The Afghan government denied that the fighters came from Afghanistan and many local and international observers note that official accounts are poorly articulated and full of contradictions.⁵⁹ In April 2020, four Tajik nationals were arrested in Germany while planning to carry out a terror attack. While the details are currently unknown, the four individuals arrested as well as the cell's ring leader, who was already in custody, were all members of the Islamic State.⁶⁰ Two weeks later, Interpol agents arrested another Tajik national wanted on terrorism charges in Germany. This individual, known as "K.Z.," is said to be part of the same cell as those arrested earlier that month.⁶¹

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Tajikistan shares Afghanistan's longest northern border and is divided from Pakistan by a narrow (10-64 km wide) strip of Afghan land.⁶² This makes it the closest post-Soviet territory to the Afghan-Pakistani conflict zone. Tajiks share ethnic ties with Afghanistan's largest minority, as some 27% of the Afghan population is ethnically Tajik. In fact, the number of Tajiks living in Afghanistan is higher than the number of Tajiks in Tajikistan itself.⁶³

However, Tajiks and Afghans differ in their religious perceptions, political culture, and understanding of history. For one thing, Muslims in Tajikistan have proven to be less prone to political Islam. The main reason has to do with a Soviet legacy of zero tolerance for organized non-state violence and weapons possession. Since the elimination of *basmachism* (anti-Soviet Muslim guerilla warfare) in the early 1930s, the Soviet state demilitarized Tajik society and secured the exclusive right to apply violence.⁶⁴ Most violent acts in post-Soviet Tajikistan are associated with the political opposition active during and after the 1992 civil war.

The post-independence period in Tajikistan has been characterized by widespread poverty and mass labor migration. In 2015, the World Bank classified Tajikistan as the country in the world most dependent on remittances, which at that time exceeded 50 percent of Tajikistan's GDP.⁶⁵ According to data from Russia's Central Bank, \$2.536 billion was transferred to Tajikistan from Russia in 2017, a \$600 million increase from 2016.⁶⁶ During the first half of 2018, Russia sent another \$672 million to Tajikistan.⁶⁷

Tajikistan's economy remains weak due to uneven structural reforms, poor governance, widespread unemployment, systemic corruption, and the external debt burden.⁶⁸ Moreover, the recent slowdown in the Russian economy, low commodity prices, and currency fluctuations are further impeding economic growth in Tajikistan. In 2017, 32% of Tajikistan's citizens lived below the poverty line, but remittances dropped from Russia to Tajikistan by more than 65% in 2015. In 2017, Tajik migrants remittances reached 31.07% of national GDP.⁶⁹ Tajikistan comes in last among Central Asian and former Soviet states in the size of the private sector (39.8%) and in received foreign direct investment (2%) as percentages of GDP.⁷⁰ To make matters worse, Tajikistan suffered a devastating economic crisis when the banking sector suffered from the country's overdependence on Russia.⁷¹ By January 1, 2018, Tajikistan's public debt reached \$3.67 billion and the country's public debt-to-GDP ratio reached 51.4%. China is Tajikistan's largest creditor; as of February 2018, the country owed more than \$1.2 billion to the PRC's Export-Import Bank.⁷² These lackluster economic conditions have bred dissatisfaction among the local population – dissatisfaction that has at times found expression in militant anti-government activity.

Tajik authorities, meanwhile, have done little to mitigate this state of affairs. The Rahmon government has taken only limited measures to combat poverty and labor migration. Rather, it has channeled its efforts into quixotic public projects such as the creation of the world's tallest flagpole at a cost of \$3.5 million⁷³ to demonstrate its power, which has helped to stoke popular resentment. During this project's develop-

ment, the cost of basic commodities in the country spiked, starkly illustrating the disconnect between Dushanbe's priorities and those of the population at large.⁷⁴ At the same time, the government has pursued suspected terrorists with considerable effort and increased its regulation of religious life in the country.⁷⁵

Entrenched economic instability and the rise of IS in Syria and Iraq in recent years has made political Islam more attractive to disenfranchised youth wishing to express their political frustrations and counteract a feeling of powerlessness. Though IS has experienced strategic losses in the recent years, its allure has not yet diminished globally. At the same time, the operational capacity of Islamic extremists in northern Afghanistan is increasing due to that nation's interminable civil war. Combined with an uncertain economic future and growing disillusionment with the Rahmon government, radical Islamism is a potentially significant threat.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

As they perceive it, Tajik Islamists challenge both the corrupt and conformist "official" Islam and the passive, ignorant, and narrow-minded "people's" Islam. Tajik Islamists condemn terrorist attacks, consider IS and other extremist groups to be ideological opponents, and believe society should be Islamized only through social and political action.

On December 2019, the National Bank of Tajikistan (NBT) announced that it will launch a national money transfer center that will centralize the receipt of remittances from abroad. The NBT will be able to monitor and regulate alternative remittances services, collect data on wire transfers, and monitor non-profit organizations to prevent misuse of financing to sponsor terrorist activities.⁷⁶

The Tajikistan legislative system insists on a clear delineation between government, political action, and religion.⁷⁷ Since 2016, the government has curbed radical and extremist religious ideas by engaging and institutionalizing traditional Islam. The government has officially approved the registered traditional religious practices of the Hanafi School of jurisprudence and Ismailism in Tajikistan.⁷⁸ The Tajik government is counting on the country's Islamic establishment – which is closely regulated – to help protect the country against radical religious ideas.

In Tajikistan, an *imam-khatib* (the leader or head of a mosque) is a permanent, full-time position controlled by the government. Since 2014, the Tajik government has provided official salaries for the country's *imam-khatibs*.⁷⁹ In 2017, Tajikistan prohibited *imam-khatibs* educated abroad from practicing in the country.⁸⁰ Rahmon has further ordered the official garments of *imam-khatibs* to be embroidered with national symbols. The government similarly decides on the subjects of homilies and speeches issued by *imams*, and provides them with "recommended" texts.⁸¹ National security services have also established pervasive video surveillance within and around major mosques in order to prevent the intrusion of external ideological influences on traditional Islam in Tajikistan.⁸² These traditional religious institutions attempt to avoid politics and any politicization of social, religious, cultural, and economic issues. In 2010, when Tajikistan had 19 registered *madrassas* (Muslim religious schools) and hundreds of unregistered ones, authorities suspended activities of Tajik *madrassas*. The last *madrassa* was closed in 2016, and Dushanbe called home 6,000 Tajikistani Muslims studying in *madrassas* and Islamic universities abroad.⁸³ In this context, Tajikistan seeks to balance the country's traditional values and adapt them to modern social and economic requirements.

Despite these initiatives, many Tajik government representatives remain deeply suspicious of religious activity and the country's Islamic clergy. The State Committee on Religious Affairs was responsible for overseeing the work of clergy and religious institutions, but in December 2006, these functions were transferred to the Department of Religions at the Ministry of Culture.⁸⁴ The pro-government, state-controlled Shuroi Ulama (Council of Learned Men) systematically organizes *imam-khatibs* as chief managers of mosques.⁸⁵ The government regularly registers existing and newly built mosques. Compulsory vetting of *imam-khatibs* by government representatives and the Shuroi Ulamo has resulted in 35 *imam-khatibs* being fired to

date for “insufficient knowledge of Islam.”⁸⁶ In its attempts to subordinate, control, and reeducate their congregants, government *imam-khatibs* distribute concert and theater tickets among believers and attend with them.⁸⁷

Strong punishments have been imposed on *imams* who have violated regime strictures. In 2016, 20 *imam-khatibs* in Tajikistan’s Sughd province were sentenced to prison for their membership in the Muslim Brotherhood, solely because they received formal religious education in Egypt or other Arab states.⁸⁸ In all, 257 citizens of this province were imprisoned for terrorism and extremism.⁸⁹ As a result, fewer *mullahs*, especially educated ones, now seek to compete for the once prestigious position of *imam-khatib*. This repression of the established community of religious experts in the country has led to the emergence of a fragmented underground Islamic authority. Meanwhile, officially appointed religious leaders lack authority and respect among devout believers.⁹⁰

The 2016 targeting of *imams* for Brotherhood affiliation is hardly an isolated incident. In January 2020 the Tajik government arrested dozens of alleged Muslim Brothers.⁹¹ Three months later, in April, a reporter was sentenced to a year in prison for hate speech after quoting the late Sayyid Qutb and Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi, two Muslim Brotherhood leaders, in a dissertation.⁹² Because the group is outlawed in Tajikistan, exact numbers are difficult to tabulate.

Tajikistan continues to delegitimize political Islam in various ways. The Tajik government views all Islamist groups as fundamentally the same, seeing no difference between IS and IRPT.⁹³ It claims that the spread of radical, transnational religious ideologies is the underlying cause of many of the new challenges it faces. The government is working to create government mechanisms and institutions to combat these trends. It believes that naïveté, unemployment, and strong Salafi religious beliefs expressed in attending mosques, wearing beards, and other practices have the potential to make violent extremists of Tajiks.⁹⁴ In November 2015, the Tajik parliament amended the Law on Combating Terrorism that allows the SNSC to block internet and telecommunications networks during counterterrorism operations. This effectively cuts off media coverage of critical police, military, and security service activity. Tajikistan also tries to control all domestic internet traffic through domestic servers managed by the head of the Communications Service Agency and President Rakhmon’s close relative, Beg *Saburov*.⁹⁵

Most Tajik fighters, meanwhile, have at least a high school diploma, and many have attended university. Moreover, not all of them could be considered pious believers before they were recruited.⁹⁶ The expert community in Tajikistan has warned of the potential risks of the government removing the IRPT from Tajikistan’s political scene.⁹⁷ Other analysts note that the oppression of Islamists can lead to mass anti-state mobilization. They believe that heavy socio-economic problems in Tajikistan and political disenfranchisement may initiate a mass mobilization “where the IRPT could play a role, like during the Tajik Civil War.”⁹⁸ Without a more formal avenue to practice public religious sentiment, radicalization could expand.

ENDNOTES

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