

# American Foreign Policy Council

# TAJIKISTAN

## QUICK FACTS

Population: 7,487,489

Area: 143,100 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Tajik 79.9%,  
Uzbek 15.3%, Russian 1.1%,  
Kyrgyz 1.1%, other 2.6%

Religions: Sunni Muslim 85%,  
Shi'a Muslim 5%, other 10%

Government Type: Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$4.741 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated June 2010)



*The former Soviet republic of Tajikistan, a nation of nearly 7.5 million people made up of nearly 80 percent Tajiks and 15 percent Uzbeks, is struggling to undermine its Islamic roots and establish itself as a modern, secular state.<sup>1</sup> But a rash of recent violence in Tajikistan provides clear evidence of an Islamic re-awakening taking place in the former Soviet republic, as extremists aggressively respond to years of successive mismanagement by a Tajik central government turned increasingly unresponsive and authoritarian since the collapse of the USSR and the aftermath of the Tajik civil war. This Islamic re-awakening is being supported and sustained by changes taking place within Tajik society itself, as families increasingly turn to Islamic leaders and doctrine for aid and advice and Tajik youth embrace the Muslim faith in greater numbers. Today, there are real fears among observers that the recent attacks and bombings in Tajik-*

*istan may be merely a foretaste of greater instability to come, and that the growing Islamic militancy there “could become a hotbed of Islamic insurgency capable of destabilizing Tajikistan and Central Asia as a whole.”*<sup>2</sup>

## ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The end of the Soviet Union brought independence as well as instability to Tajikistan, as regional clans who “enjoyed privileged economic status during the Soviet era” sought to maintain their grip on the levers of state power.<sup>3</sup> Former Communist political elites from the Kulyab region in southeast Tajikistan seized control of Dushanbe and elected Emomali Rakhmonov as President.<sup>4</sup> An opposition group, the United Tajik Opposition (UTO)—comprised of Islamists from the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) and secularists, including democratic, nationalist, and separatist movements—coalesced to oppose the new government, provoking the Tajik civil war.<sup>5</sup> That conflict raged until 1997, when the Tajik government and the UTO agreed to a ceasefire and a UN-brokered peace deal. The peace deal gave the UTO, mostly the IRPT, a 30 percent stake in the central government.<sup>6</sup>

But in spite of the power-sharing agreement, the Islamists suffered a blow to their prestige and credibility; the Tajik people recognized the motivations of the IRPT and their betrayal of Islamic principles in favor of a union with secularists through which to fight for power.<sup>7</sup> And although the IRPT survived as an Islamic political party, the only one of its kind in Central Asia, it effectively has been marginalized. This was evident from Tajikistan’s February 2000 parliamentary elections, in which the IRPT only managed to win 7.5 percent of the votes and secure only two seats in the lower house of the country’s Supreme Assembly.<sup>8</sup>

As the IRPT has resorted to political maneuvering to stay in power and remain relevant, Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami (HuT, the Islamic Party of Liberation), has gradually grown to become Tajikistan’s most prominent Islamist group. According to experts, HuT’s ability to “frame the social and economic problems in Tajikistan as a result of secularism, widespread corruption in the government, Western

cultural influence and the absence of a strong universal Islamic state” has given the group “ideological superiority” and put it in a favorable position to recruit disillusioned Tajiks.<sup>9</sup> HuT’s radical but non-violent approach has also succeeded in attracting extremists to its ranks, and opened the door for more radical and violent Islamist groups, like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), to re-emerge.

### *Hizb ut-Tahrir*

Hizb ut-Tahrir arrived in Tajikistan in the late 1990s and rose to prominence as its sometime competitors for influence among the country’s Muslims, most directly the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, declined in popularity. The former lost its religious cachet as it developed into a political party and migrated into the political mainstream, while the latter joined the Taliban against U.S.-led forces in Afghanistan and was almost completely routed as a result.

Like the IMU, HuT has called for the overthrow of the Tajik government, albeit through peaceful means, in order to establish an Islamic state. Over time, it became popular among ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks alike through the widespread promulgation of radical Islamic literature. The two groups, however, gravitated to HuT for different reasons; Uzbeks in Tajikistan joined on account of the group’s promotion of Muslim solidarity, while Tajiks joined to rally against the rampant social and economic problems in Tajik society.<sup>10</sup> Recognizing the threat, the Tajik government moved swiftly to declare HuT an illegal political party in 1999, and subsequently arrested and prosecuted HuT members under Article 187 (arousing religious and ethnic dissension) and Article 307 (calling for the overthrow of the government) of the Tajik criminal code.<sup>11</sup> Between 2000 and 2005, about 500 alleged members of HuT were arrested;<sup>12</sup> yet only about 150–200 of those HuT members were prosecuted and are serving sentences currently in Tajik prisons.<sup>13</sup>

Because of the intense crackdown on HuT, Tajik authorities suspect that the group has gone underground, making it more difficult to fully eradicate. Tajik security officials have admitted that the state “will continue to have problems with Hizb ut-Tahrir, no matter how hard they try to undermine them.”<sup>14</sup>

### *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan*

During the late summer and early fall of 2010, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) demonstrated a rejuvenated ability and eagerness to carry out violence in Central Asia, and has even ventured to establish ties with European-based terrorist operations. The IMU's renewed sense of radicalism has in large part resulted from the death of long-time leader Tohir Yuldashev, who was killed in an August 27, 2009 drone strike by Coalition forces in Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup>

Yuldashev had been “quite content operating as an armed wing for the Taliban in Pakistan, working as a supporting group.”<sup>16</sup> From the group's inception, Yuldashev had served as the IMU's ideological leader, touring the Middle East establishing contacts with other terrorist organizations—including al-Qaeda. His counterpart, Juma Namangani, served as the group's tactical commander. Namangani, who had fought with the Soviets in Afghanistan and with the IRPT in Tajikistan's civil war, commanded the IMU's narcotics-trafficking and insurgent campaign to overthrow the government of Uzbekistan. It was Namangani that led the IMU into combat against U.S. forces and the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan following the U.S. invasion in October 2001, resulting in the group's near-annihilation and his own death the following month. By 2004, the group's main military wing had been decimated while smaller factions broke away, leading experts to speculate as to whether the group had survived.

The IMU subsequently regrouped in the mountains along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, and supported the Taliban on cross-border raids and helped revitalize the insurgency in Northern Afghanistan. But Yuldashev's death has apparently energized the group to return to its founding cause: overthrowing the Uzbek government and destabilizing Central Asia.<sup>17</sup> Experts agree that the socio-economic “conditions in Central Asia are presently ripe for an IMU comeback” and recent events chronicle the IMU's resurgence in Tajikistan.<sup>18</sup>

These include the August 2010 jailbreak of 25 inmates with Islamic militant ties from the State Committee for National Security's high-security prison in Dushanbe,<sup>19</sup> as well as the September

2010 suicide car bomb attack on a police station in the Northern Tajikistan city of Khujand—an attack the IMU has been accused of masterminding.<sup>20</sup> Also in September 2010, the IMU conducted a brazen ambush of a Tajik military convoy in the Rasht Valley, killing 25 soldiers.<sup>21</sup> Abdulfattoh Ahmadi, a spokesman for the IMU, issued a statement claiming responsibility and demanding that the Tajik government cease its crackdown on Islamic society.<sup>22</sup> This series of recent violent events has sparked a government campaign to capture the escaped inmates and counter the growing insurgency in the Rasht Valley of Tajikistan.

## ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan's call for Tajikistan to cease its crackdown on Islamic society is a reflection of a broader trend in Tajik society. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* reports that “Islamic names are the new fashion”<sup>23</sup> and families are increasingly turning to *sharia* law to resolve disputes.<sup>24</sup> In fact, a Gallup poll conducted in August 2010 revealed that “85 percent of Tajiks said religion was an important part of their lives, with only 12 percent saying it was not, making Tajikistan first among Central Asian states in terms of religiosity.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, so rapidly has Islam and Islamism increased in popularity that the Tajik government now fears that it could undermine the influence of the state.<sup>26</sup>

Islamism was not always so prominent in Tajikistan. Following the end of the Tajik civil war in 1997, ordinary Tajiks grew so disillusioned by the ambitions of the warring-Islamist factions that many turned their backs on the rhetoric of religious radicals. In her book *Muslim Youth: Tensions and Transitions in Tajikistan*, scholar Collette Harris comments that “in Dushanbe, on the surface at least, modernization appeared to be a far stronger force than religion. Almost none of the locals I saw dressed in a conspicuously Islamic fashion. In fact, there seems to be little support for any kind of Islamization among Dushanbe's population.”<sup>27</sup>

Unfortunately, modernization in Tajikistan has barely limped along, with the corrupt and authoritarian elites hoarding power and refusing to invest in the country's troubled economy and civil society.

In a 2009 study, the International Crisis Group judged that Tajikistan is “far from being a bulwark against the spread of extremism and violence from Afghanistan;” rather, it said, the country looks “increasingly like its southern neighbour – a weak state that is suffering from a failure of leadership.”<sup>28</sup> The ICG goes on to explain that Tajikistan is on the road to failure as the government will be “confronted with serious economic problems” as the poor get poorer.<sup>29</sup>

Signs of disenchantment with the government and a preference for Islamic reforms began with the winter crises of 2008 and 2009, when the Tajik people shivered through harsh winters as a result of Tajikistan’s dilapidated energy infrastructure. Despite government assurances of available gas and electric power, people put their trust in collecting combustible fuel for heating and cooking. In a clear expression of dissatisfaction, some Tajiks even exclaimed, “Even in the civil war we had electricity!”<sup>30</sup> Outrage peaked during the economic slowdown of 2009 because the Tajik economy, fueled by remittances from Tajik migrant laborers and devastated by the lack of jobs at home and abroad, nearly failed. As a result, according to one NGO study, approximately 30 percent of migrant workers returned home, while 60 percent of Tajiks at home “who say they need medical care are forced to treat themselves” and “roughly 40 percent [of Tajiks] say they cannot afford enough food, while 70 percent report they rarely eat meat.”<sup>31</sup> As a result of these conditions, Tajiks are said to be living in “survival mode.”<sup>32</sup>

According to experts, the lack of competent leadership in Tajikistan has served to exacerbate the country’s economic crisis.<sup>33</sup> The government’s failures and the public’s outrage illustrate the vacuum created by the lack of social order—a vacuum that Islamism has recently begun to fill. And while remittances have gradually picked up once again, the effects of the global economic crisis and governmental neglect can still be felt. Gross unemployment remains the norm, and unemployed and defiant young men, who have not migrated abroad for work, are particularly vulnerable for Islamist recruitment and increasing radicalization.

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Fears of an impending Islamic re-awakening—and the attendant threat of anti-state terror—has led the Tajik government to launch a major effort to make the practice of religion in Tajikistan more restrictive. Even before it passed new legislation in March 2009 hindering the practice of religion, the Tajik government had a history of banning religious expression deemed foreign and religious movements deemed threatening. Thus Hizb ut-Tahrir was declared illegal soon after its emergence in Tajikistan in 1999, and its members arrested and thrown in jail. In March 2006, Tajikistan similarly banned the Islamic revivalist movement Tablighi Jama'at, claiming that members of the movement were perpetrating subversion of Tajikistan's constitutional order.<sup>34</sup> In April 2007, the government of Tajikistan imposed a dress code on university students by banning the *hijab*, the Islamic headscarf. Miniskirts and skimpy tops were also banned, with these articles of clothing declared foreign and inappropriate.

Subsequently, in January 2009, the Tajik government formally banned Salafism as an ideological movement, claiming it to be a potential threat to national security.<sup>35</sup> And then, in March 2009, the Tajik parliament passed the new, groundbreaking religion law, artfully named the “Law on the Freedom of Consciousness,” which “imposes censorship on religious literature and restricts performing rituals to state-approved venues.”<sup>36</sup> The law “makes it harder for new religious communities to get registration.”<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, it requires religious groups to report funding sources and any foreign contacts, restricts construction of new mosques and requires parental consent for young people under the age of 18 seeking religious education.<sup>38</sup> While Tajik officials claim that the new law is “fully in line with the constitution, and is a well-designed set of ground-rules that seeks principally to prevent the growth of radical religious groups,” it has been roundly criticized by international bodies such as the United Nations, the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.<sup>39</sup> The latter has charged that the new religion law essentially legalizes “harsh policies already adopted by the Tajik government against its majority Muslim population.”<sup>40</sup>



In tandem with the passage of repressive religious policies, Tajik government authorities have intensified their monitoring of religious expression and regularly break up unauthorized religious practices. In early July 2010, authorities raided seven unregistered religious schools, or *madrassas*, in the Isfara, Istaravshan, Panjakent and Ghafurov districts.<sup>41</sup> The following month, Tajik police raided a separate unregistered *madrassa* in the Rudaki district south of Dushanbe and detained the founder, Mavlavi Abduqahor, and 70 of his students.<sup>42</sup> President Emomali Rakhmon has continued his campaign against Islamic dress in schools by urging Tajik women not to don the *hijab*. Authorities are now extending the *hijab* ban beyond the universities and into public places like the bazaar.<sup>43</sup> Education officials are now also pressuring parents of Islamic students studying abroad. In August 2010, President Rakhmon reportedly “asked parents to recall their sons and daughters from foreign madrasahs and universities lest they join extremist or even terrorist groups.”<sup>44</sup>

But mounting state pressure against prevailing socio-religious attitudes is frustrating and alienating many ordinary Tajiks and moderate Muslims. Religious imams at registered mosques, like Muhammad-jon Ortiqov of the grand mosque in Ghafurov district, have expressed concerns about the authorities’ apparent fear and suspicion of religious expression, and say such an approach is bound to alienate moderate Muslims.<sup>45</sup> Further intervention in the name of suppressing extremism will likely create the opposite effect by “driving disgruntled Muslims into the hands of covert extremist groups.”<sup>46</sup> And extremist groups like the IMU will likely continue to raise the banner of violent resistance against the authoritarian and corrupt government of Tajikistan. Indeed, there are fears that the recent attacks and bombings in Tajikistan may be merely a foretaste of greater instability to come, and that the growing Islamic militancy there “could become a hotbed of Islamic insurgency capable of destabilizing Tajikistan and Central Asia as a whole.”<sup>47</sup>



## ENDNOTES

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[3] Emmanuel Karagiannis, "The Challenge Of Radical Islam In Tajikistan: Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami," *Nationalities Papers* 34, no. 1, March 2006.

[4] In early April 2007, President Emomali Rakhmonov officially de-Russified his name and became Emomali Rakhmon, he also called on all Tajiks to follow suit.

[5] Notably, the Tajik civil war was driven first and foremost by religious, rather than ethnic, interests and tensions. Shirin Akiner, a prominent Central Asia scholar, points out that the civil war was not "primarily 'driven' by deep-rooted animosities between regional or ethnic groups. Instead the conflict in Tajikistan had the classic dynamics of a civil war in which different interest groups mobilized to contest control of the state and its resources." Shirin Akiner and Catherine Barnes, "The Tajik Civil War: Causes And Dynamics," *Conciliation Resources*, March 2001, <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/tajikistan/causes-dynamics.php>.

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