

Tajikistan Early Warning: Internal Pressures, External Threats

Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°78

Bishkek/Brussels, 11 January 2016

I. Overview

Tajikistan, Central Asia's poorest state, is under dangerous pressure both internally and externally. President Emomali Rahmon's 23-year rule is marred by violence, lack of accountability, corruption and mass migration. Remittances and drug trafficking are key sources of income. Controls on religion and political opposition, including a ban on the moderate Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), foster resentment. Security along the 1,400-km border with Afghanistan is inconsistent at best, and increasing instability in northern Afghanistan, where Central Asian militants are allied with the Taliban, poses a threat to Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan alike. Russia's support to Tajikistan is a major component in regional security, but Moscow's concerns about internal opposition to Rahmon are growing. The European Union (EU) and U.S. have only modest ability to influence the Tajik government, but they, Russia and others should be alert to the increasingly worrying direction of Rahmon's leadership, the risks of state failure and the potential for Islamist extremists to capitalise.

The 1997 peace agreement masked rather than resolved tensions after a brutal civil war (1992-1997) and is unravelling. Its core was IRPT representation of the war's opposition forces in parliament, but Rahmon deprived the party of its parliament seats after March 2015 elections that were riddled with irregularities, banned it in August, and declared it a terrorist organisation in September. The IRPT's fate and restrictions on religious expression underscore the state's contempt for pluralism. Widespread corruption and cronyism send the message to Islamist and secular citizens alike that the political process is closed to all who might challenge Rahmon.

The defection of the head of the Special Assignment Police Unit (OMON), Gen. Gulmurod Khalimov, to the Islamic State (IS) in Syria in May revealed schisms within the security elite, suggested Rahmon may no longer know who can be trusted and reflected the growing appeal of violent radical Islam. The president's responses are about his survival and do little to reverse the perception that the government is politically and morally bankrupt.

The economy is crippled, with the downturn in Russia adding to the difficulties because remittances are more than 40 per cent of GDP, and some 300,000-400,000 migrants returned home in 2015 with little hope of finding work. The rough economic

climate, however, is fundamentally of the government's making: years of endemic corruption have bled local businesses dry and limit the impact of donor aid. Meanwhile, drug trafficking from Afghanistan is growing. Border security, despite investments and technical assistance from Russia, the EU and U.S., is at best haphazard, partly because of the mountainous terrain but also because the illegal trade has corrupted Tajik security structures.

Given its problems, Tajikistan should be a conflict-prevention priority for the international community. While pragmatic engagement should focus on preventing further repression and encouraging an orderly transition when Rahmon's term ends in 2020, the risks in sustaining a frightened autocrat with no interest in a credible political process must be factored in. Under the weight of economic crisis and political stagnation, the state may continue weakening, perhaps with little impact beyond its borders, but its internal and external fragility might also lead to instability that would resonate in the broader region. The border weaknesses increase Tajikistan's potential as a staging post for Islamic militants with ambitions elsewhere in Central Asia. The Uzbek border is relatively strong but that with Kyrgyzstan is much weaker.

State failure, due to whatever factors, would pose a major headache for Russia, other members of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and China, with whose restive Xinjiang province Tajikistan shares a 414-km border. CSTO membership and Russia's military presence in the country is a deterrent against incursions, but the CSTO is untested. Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, which have clear interests in maintaining peace and security in Tajikistan, should prioritise the security of their respective borders with it, not least as insurance against weaknesses on the Tajik-Afghan border.

Russia, the EU and U.S. should support efforts to increase regional border security. In their political engagement in the region, including their formal security and human rights dialogue formats, the EU and its member states and Washington should also highlight the strong link between political oppression and human rights abuses and longer-term instability. Russia, the UN and others who helped engineer the 1997 agreement, including the U.S. and Iran, should urge Rahmon to honour its principles in the interest of sustainable stability. Otherwise, there is little to stop a slide back into old conflict patterns, now aggravated by a restless northern Afghanistan and the appeal of militant Islam.

I. Internal Threats to Stability

Though until recently Rahmon paid lip service to democracy, his presidency is characterised by economic and social stagnation exacerbated by venality and mismanagement.¹ The only meaningful opposition party, the IRPT, is now banned and labelled terrorist. Fraudulent parliamentary elections and dozens of arrests in 2015 have silenced political foes.² An exiled opposition leader was murdered in Turkey in March.³ Civil society activists fear increased scrutiny and harassment.⁴

¹ Crisis Group Asia Reports N°s 162, *Tajikistan: On the Road to Failure*, 12 February 2009; and 205, *Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats*, 24 May 2011.

² The People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDPT) won 51 seats, the Agrarian Party of Tajikistan (APT) five; the Party of Economic Reforms of Tajikistan (PERT) three; the Communist Party of Tajikistan (CPT) two; and the Socialist Party of Tajikistan (SPT) and the Democratic Party of Tajiki-

The president is not in a stronger position as a result. His political and security apparatus is fragile. Civil war divisions have survived the 1997 peace agreement; some areas controlled during the conflict by the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) never fully accepted central government authority. A Russian diplomat estimated Dushanbe effectively controls just 30 per cent of the country.⁵ The May 2015 defection to IS of the OMON head and the September decision of Deputy Defence Minister Abduhalim Nazarzoda to fight his way out of the capital rather than accept arrest on what he called trumped-up coup-plotting charges point to crumbling loyalties.⁶ Since the civil war's end, Rahmon has tried to marginalise and eliminate opponents, a tendency now gaining momentum. In turn, his government's draconian responses to what in the society is not firmly under its control, such as dissent and Islam, are creating a backlash.

A. *Banning the Legal Islamists*

The 1997 peace agreement ended five years of fighting between the UTO and the Russian- and Uzbek-backed government that cost 60,000 to 100,000 lives and devastated the economy. The peace deal aimed to create a multiparty system to channel aspirations of the Islamic and other segments of society into legitimate politics.⁷ In 2000, the IRPT won two of the 63 lower-house-of-parliament seats, while ex-UTO members were given government and security-service posts as part of the 30 per cent power-sharing formula. These included Gen. Mirzo Ziyoyev, a controversial commander and IRPT member who retained links with the militant Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).⁸ Despite government disdain for the IRPT and other opposition

stan (DPT) one each. The IRPT lost the two seats it had held since 2000. PDPT is President Rahmon party. The IRPT had been the only credible opposition. "Republic of Tajikistan: Parliamentary Elections 1 March 2015 ... Election Observation Mission, Final Report", Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), 15 May 2015.

³ "Tajikistan's Dissident's Murder Rattles Opposition", Institute for War and Peace Reporting, RCA Issue 755, 16 March 2015.

⁴ "НПО в Таджикистане возьмут под госконтроль?" ["NGOs in Tajikistan will be under the state control?"], Asia-Plus, 30 November 2014. Parliament amended the "On Public Associations" law on 10 June 2015. "The amendments make it mandatory to declare all grants received by NGOs from donors abroad or from international organisations to a specialised register at the MoJ [Ministry of Justice]. The amendment also introduces an obligation to notify projects to be implemented with those funds. Although these amendments have reportedly already entered into force, the implementing procedures are not yet known nor have they been presented to civil society. Accordingly, NGOs operate in a high risk, uncertain environment". "Tajikistan: Clampdown on civil society – Preliminary findings of a fact-finding mission on the situation of human rights defenders and NGOs", World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), 30 November 2015.

⁵ Crisis Group interview, Russian diplomat, October 2015. A European diplomat also raised doubts about Rahmon's control, Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, December 2015. See also Crisis Group Report, *Tajikistan: On the Road to Failure*, op. cit.

⁶ "Islamic State Threatens Central Asia", Crisis Group blog, 8 June 2015.

⁷ More than 90 per cent of Tajiks are Muslim, most belonging to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam; about 4 per cent are Ismaili Shia. Crisis Group Asia Report N°59, *Central Asia: Islam and the State*, 10 July 2003.

⁸ Crisis Group Asia Report N°30, *Tajikistan: An Uncertain Peace*, 24 December 2001. The IMU was formed in 1998 by Juma Namangani and Tokhir Yuldashev to overthrow Uzbekistan's government and create a caliphate in Central Asia. Crisis Group Asia Report N°21, *Central Asia: Uzbekistan at*

parties, their limited political participation maintained the basis of the peace agreement. The IRPT consistently had two parliamentary seats and said it was committed to moderate Islam, peace and power sharing, but Rahmon distrusted the associations of some ex-UTO commanders and the reluctance of certain areas to accept government control.⁹

Rahmon's anti-IRPT sentiments run deep. The peace deal owed much to pressure from Russia, a key intermediary in the inter-Tajik negotiations along with the UN, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Iran, Afghanistan and the Central Asian states.¹⁰ Rahmon tolerated the party for a time, but steadily applied restrictions.¹¹ After the death of IRPT leader Said Abdullah Nuri in 2006 and the appointment of a more modern Islamist, Mukhiddin Kabiri, as his successor, Rahmon began to view it as a direct threat.¹² A graduate of the Russian foreign ministry's diplomatic academy, the well-educated and articulate Kabiri also represented his party's liberal wing, understood secularism, eschewed violence and favoured democracy.

Ahead of the 1 March 2015 parliamentary elections, the government ordered imams at state-registered mosques to preach against voting for the IRPT, which was labelled "the party of war".¹³ The IRPT was reported to have received just 1.5 per cent of votes and lost its two parliament seats.¹⁴ The OSCE said the elections "were not administered in an impartial manner"; others described them as "blatantly fixed".¹⁵ This was the beginning of the end for the IRPT as a legal entity. Kabiri, fearing arrest, went to Turkey.¹⁶ The government banned the party in August and within weeks declared it a terrorist organisation.¹⁷

Ten – Repression and Instability, 21 August 2001. As part of the peace deal, the UTO was disbanded. "UN welcomes disbanding of Tajik force", BBC News, 4 August 1999.

⁹ "От мирного соглашения до арестов" ["From Peace Accord to Arrests"], Asia-Plus, 5 October 2015; Crisis Group Report, *Tajikistan: An Uncertain Peace*, op. cit.

¹⁰ A Tajik observer said Russia had in effect forced Rahmon to accept the deal. Crisis Group interview, Dushanbe, July 2015. See also Tetsuro Iji, "Negotiating an End to the Conflict in Tajikistan", *Ritsumeikan Journal Asia Pacific Studies*, no. 29 (2010) pp. 1-23.

¹¹ "U.S. Envoy on Restrictions on Political Opposition in Tajikistan", State Department, 26 February 2015; "Tajikistan: Reverse Political Party Closure", Human Rights Watch, 14 September 2015.

¹² "The IRPT's biggest challenge will be to remain united and not fall victim to President Rahmonov's plan to weaken their party in order to consolidate his political power". "Kabiri Leads Islamic Party after Nuri's Death", U.S. embassy Dushanbe cable, 18 August 2006, as made public by WikiLeaks. Rahmon dropped the Russian "ov" from his name in 2011.

¹³ "От мирного соглашения до арестов" ["From peace accord to arrests"], Asia-Plus, 5 October 2015. Use of mosques against the IRPT continued after the elections; on 27 March, imams read government-provided sermons calling for a referendum to ban the party. The government controls sermons through the semi-official Ulama Council of scholars and religious authorities. It also pays the salaries of imams of the large mosques, the only ones in which sermons are permitted. "Annual Report 2015", op. cit.

¹⁴ "От мирного соглашения до арестов" ["From peace accord to arrests"], op. cit.

¹⁵ "Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, International Election Observation Mission ...", OSCE/ODIHR, OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, European Parliament, 2 March 2015. Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dushanbe, 10 July 2015. The OSCE reported "significant shortcomings", including "ballot box stuffing" and "disregard of counting procedures". "Final Report", op. cit.

¹⁶ Vladimir Mukhin, "Америка и Россия не могут поделить Таджикистан" ["America and Russia can't divide Tajikistan"], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 3 July 2015.

¹⁷ Without being specific, the general prosecutor said 45 IRPT members committed "grave and especially grave crimes", and the party threatened "the foundations of the constitutional order and sovereignty of the Republic of Tajikistan". "От мирного соглашения до арестов" ["From peace accord

This deprived the ex-UTO constituency of even the formal political representation it had in a rubberstamp parliament. Eliminating the opposition and using the semi-official Ulama Council to enforce a restrictive government-approved version of Islam may make more radical alternatives attractive to Islamists, especially the young.¹⁸ A senior Western official said, “this was the wrong moment to throw [the IRPT] out even from a Machiavellian point of view. This was stupid. It would have been even better to give them more seats”.¹⁹

The IRPT’s situation became yet more precarious in early September, when the government linked it to deadly clashes around Dushanbe with forces of Deputy Defence Minister Nazarzoda, whom it accused of plotting a coup.²⁰ In a statement attributed to him, Nazarzoda said he would rather face death than arrest and torture and warned that ex-UTO members would be targeted for failing to sign off on the “liquidation of the IRPT”.²¹ He was killed in the Romit Gorge not far from Dushanbe on 16 September after an extensive manhunt.²² The IRPT denied he had ever been a member.

Thirteen IRPT leaders were subsequently detained to “prevent new terrorist acts” and “crimes of an extremist nature”.²³ The president called Nazarzoda and his associates “terrorists with evil consciences who pursued the same goals as Islamic State”.²⁴ By October, up to 78 party members were being held by the police or the State Committee for National Security (GKNB).²⁵ Buzurgmehr Yorov, a lawyer hired to defend them, was arrested and charged with fraud on 28 September, a frequent tactic against lawyers engaged in politically sensitive cases.²⁶

In November, at least ten former supporters of Gen. Ziyoyev – the UTO commander turned emergencies minister with IMU links, who died in clashes with government forces in 2009 – were arrested after a captured Nazarzoda supporter confessed the groups were jointly plotting against the government.²⁷ During the arrests,

to arrests”], Asia-Plus, op. cit.; “Министерство юстиции: ‘Партия исламского возрождения Таджикистана больше не является общереспубликанской партией’” [“Ministry of Justice: ‘Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan is no longer a republican party’”], Khovar, 28 August 2015.

¹⁸ Makhmuddzhon Rakhmatzoda, “Исследование: 30% учащихся соблюдают ‘шариат’”, [“Research: 30 per cent of the students follow Sharia”], Radio Ozodi, 19 December 2015

¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, head of inter-governmental organisation, Dushanbe, July 2015.

²⁰ “Спецназ Таджикистана окружил остатки сторонников мятежного генерала” [“Tajikistan’s special forces surround remnants of renegade general’s supporters”], Interfax, 12 September.

²¹ “Заявление Генерала Абдухалима Назарзода” [“General Abdukhalim Nazarzoda’s statement”], Central Asia – Now, 7 September 2015, http://ca-now.org/news/zajavlenie_generala_abdukhalima_nazarzoda/2015-09-07-428.

²² “МВД и ГКНБ: В Ромите ликвидирован генерал Назарзода” [“MIA and SCNS: General Nazarzoda is liquidated in Romit”], Radio Ozodi, 16 September 2015.

²³ “Обезглавленная ПИВТ” [“Beheaded IRPT”], Asia-Plus, 25 September 2015.

²⁴ “Президент Таджикистана сравнил мятежников с террористами ИГИЛ” [“President of Tajikistan compared the rebels to ISIL terrorists”], Interfax, 6 September 2015.

²⁵ “Tajikistan: Human Rights Lawyer Detained”, Human Rights Watch, October 2015; “A Brief Glimpse at IRPT’s Political Detainees, Torture and the Un-rule of Law”, Payom.net, 26 October 2015. A Tajik analyst said, “as with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt when their banning led to some of its members joining ISIS ..., so in Tajikistan, by doing away with a moderate opposition, its members may choose extremist groups. This poses a serious threat for the government. But their logic is different. They are incapable of listening”. Crisis Group interview, Dushanbe, 2015.

²⁶ “Tajikistan: Human Rights Lawyer Detained”, op. cit.

²⁷ Crisis Group Report, *Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats*, op. cit.

a Ziyoyev supporter blew himself up with a hand grenade.²⁸ Many weapons were uncovered. By linking Nazarzoda and Ziyoyev, the government may be reviving civil war themes so as to reinforce fears, but there is enough resentment in Ziyoyev's old Rasht stronghold – never fully under central government control – to make any connection between the two groups ominous.

B. *The Khalimov Affair and IS*

The high-profile defection to IS of Col. Khalimov, the 40-year-old OMON (special police) head, in April, badly wounded Rahmon's sense of security. Khalimov, trained in the U.S. and Russia and a veteran of government assaults on Khorog, the capital of Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region, in 2012, was an insider with no UTO history.²⁹ In May, a video of him, presumably in Syria, surfaced on YouTube. In it he threatened:

Listen, you dogs, the president and ministers. If only you knew how many boys, our brothers are here, waiting and yearning to return to reestablish Sharia [Islamic] law [in Tajikistan]. ... We are coming to you, God willing, we are coming to you with slaughter Listen, you American pigs, I've been to America three times, and I saw how you train fighters to kill Muslims. God willing, I will come with this weapon to your cities, your homes, and we will kill you.³⁰

Citing repressive religious policies, he appealed to both those working for the government and disenfranchised migrant workers to overthrow Rahmon.

Khalimov's focus on restrictions against Islamic practises is significant. While there is no indication that violent religious extremism has attracted mass support, the government's heavy-handed tactics adversely impact the devout, fuelling resentment and radicalising moderate believers. They also underscore that the government lacks the political strategy and security skills to devise targeted security measures, including prevention, against genuine threats. A journalist who covers the region said its attitude toward religion reveals an illiberal approach and a fear of pluralism: "Our

²⁸ "Задержаны 10 сторонников Мирзо Зиёева" ["Ten followers of Mirzo Ziyoyev are detained"], Radio Ozodi, 9 November 2015.

²⁹ Khorog, in the mountainous south east, is a perennial source of anxiety for the government, de-facto outside central control since independence; the ethnic-Pamiri population supported the opposition during the civil war. In July 2012, 3,000 government troops entered Khorog (pop. 30,000) and surrounding areas without warning, to capture "rebels and bandits" accused of the fatal stabbing of the regional head of the State Committee for National Security (GKNB), Maj-Gen. Abdullo Nazarov. The main target was Tolib Ayombekov, a border guard commander at Ishkashim on the Afghan border, and fighters loyal to him. His men were accused of killing Nazarov and smuggling drugs, gems and tobacco. Most Tajik experts believe the murder was criminal, not political. Nazarov and Ayombekov fought for the UTO during the civil war. On 21 May 2014, riots broke out in Khorog after the arrest of an alleged drug dealer. Up to 700 people burned a police station, prosecutor's office and court building. The next day, locals demanded dismissal of all Khorog administration employees. On 24 May, men with Kalashnikovs and grenades attacked the GKNB office.

³⁰ Khalimov's U.S. training was part of the State Department's Diplomatic Security/Anti-Terrorism Assistance program. Ishaan Tharoor, "The U.S.-trained Commander of Tajikistan's Special Forces Has Joined the Islamic State", *The Washington Post*, 28 May 2015. His personnel occasionally protected the U.S. embassy in Dushanbe in 2013.

leaders cannot analyse the bigger picture, so they look at second, third or fourth rate issues, such as the beard, and waste time and resources on it”.³¹

Though the percentage of confirmed Islamic extremists in Tajikistan’s 8.2 million population is small, the potential risk they pose is considerable. Hundreds of Tajiks have joined IS, but an OSCE official said estimates were “extremely conservative; you could double them at least”.³² In August 2015, what appeared to be an IS black flag was raised in the capital of southern Shahritus district bordering Afghanistan.³³ The interior ministry reported a second IS flag in Nurek district, much closer to Dushanbe, and a third in Kulyob, near the Afghan border.³⁴ Unemployment and political, religious and social exclusion contribute to radical Islam’s appeal to both men and women, even in areas previously considered immune to radicalisation.³⁵ A UN official said:

The potential radicalisation of Tajikistan’s youth is something to be concerned about IS has a very slick recruitment regime, and the sense of stability and togetherness advertised by Chechen Russians has been effective Life has become more difficult and financially unviable [in Tajikistan], and the lure and appeal of IS is understood.³⁶

II. The Afghan Border

The Tajik-Afghan border is the weakest link in Central Asia’s security. Divided by the Panj River, it is a conduit for Afghan opiates and other contraband. Insecurity in Afghanistan’s northern provinces, including Taliban control of districts across from Tajikistan, has increased pressure, with risk that battle-experienced Islamic militants could link up with even small numbers of potential allies inside the country. The Tajik army forms a second defence line behind 16,000 border guards, but the strength of these forces is doubtful.³⁷ If militants were to press north, the CSTO would likely be

³¹ Crisis Group interview, Tajik district bordering Afghanistan, July 2015.

³² Crisis Group interview, OSCE official, November 2015. In July, the government said 519 had joined. “Глава МВД о Гулмуроде Халимове и новых данных воюющих в Сирии граждан Таджикистана” [“Head of Interior Ministry about Gulmurod Khalimov and new information about citizens of Tajikistan fighting in Syria”], Avesta, 25 July 2015. Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°72, *Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia*, 20 January 2015.

³³ Sairahmon Nazriev, “Боздошти наврасон ба гумони барафрохтани парчами ДИИШ дар Шахритӯс” [“Arrest of youngsters on suspicion of raising of ISIS flag in Shahritus”], Asia-Plus, 18 August 2015. See also Crisis Group Briefing, *Syria Calling*, op. cit. Women radicalised in southern Kyrgyzstan say they were motivated in part by dissatisfaction with their social, religious, economic and political opportunities. Crisis Group plans a briefing on women and radicalisation in 2016.

³⁴ Mahmudjon Rahmatzoda, “Узви ҲНИТ барои парчами ДИИШ боздошт шуд” [“Member of the IRPT arrested for ISIS Flag”], Radio Ozodi, 14 October 2015.

³⁵ A Tajik journalist said, “I just came from Kulyob, and the Bazaar is the place where you can determine [the pulse of the city]. Kulyobis used to be communists [in the Soviet era]; now they are nearly all Islamists. That was a real shock to me”. Crisis Group interview, Dushanbe, July 2015.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, head of inter-governmental organisation, Dushanbe, July 2015.

³⁷ Avaz Yuldashev, “Таджикистан создал вторую линию обороны на границе с Афганистаном” [“Tajikistan formed the second defence line on the border with Afghanistan”], Asia-Plus, 4 May 2015; Galim Faskhutdinov, “Tajikistan Plans Second Line of Defence on Afghan Border”, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 9 November 2015.

asked to intervene.³⁸ Western diplomats say Uzbekistan would be the main target, but state fragility and army and security-service weakness make Tajikistan particularly prone to destabilisation.³⁹

A. *Militants*

Analysts differ on the number and allegiance of foreign fighters in northern Afghanistan. Alexander Manilov, who coordinates border-troop commanders for the Moscow-led Commonwealth of Independent State (CIS), said in November 2015 that there are 4,500 militants on CIS borders with Afghanistan;⁴⁰ Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister Hekmat Khalil Karzai said 1,300 foreign fighters aligned to a variety of groups participated in the battle for Kunduz in September.⁴¹ Some observers believe Russia and the Central Asian governments overstate the Islamic extremist threat, including IS and potential spillover from Afghanistan, to retain influence, gain financial advantage and justify internal repression.⁴² A Russian analyst said the Tajik narrative on Nazarzoda and the IRPT is a prime example:

Moscow fully accepted Dushanbe's official version, that it was a coup attempt inspired by IRPT with the support of external forces. In the coverage from pro-government experts and mass media, the emphasis was on the Islamic nature of the events and the participation of foreign sponsors in them. Rahmon's actions were framed as "protection of statehood and stability", which fully coincides with the Kremlin's ideological discourse on its own internal policies.⁴³

However, despite the politicisation of the threat and patent gaps in intelligence on foreign fighters in northern Afghanistan, the risk is growing, amplified by two unconnected but mutually reinforcing events: the initial U.S. announcement – since partially reversed – that it would withdraw all its troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014; and Pakistan's decision to attack militants in North Waziristan, close to the Afghan border. The latter drove foreign fighters, including a significant number of Central Asians, to take refuge in Afghanistan's Badakhshan province. The militants, including Tajik, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Chechen and Uighur fighters, have since fought the Afghan army in Kunduz, Badakhshan, Baghlan, Faryab and Takhar provinces.⁴⁴

A former high-ranking Kyrgyz defence official said militants in northern Afghanistan probably have a timeframe of "two or three years" before seeking to advance into Central Asia.⁴⁵ The IMU is fragmenting, with some factions aligned to IS and others to the Taliban in districts near Tajikistan. It remains more interested in Uzbeki-

³⁸ The CSTO, a Russian-led security bloc, includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan suspended membership in 2012. Russian border guards patrolled the Tajik-Afghan border until 2005.

³⁹ The view that Uzbekistan would be the main target of militants – Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dushanbe, July 2015 – is echoed by Russian officials and analysts.

⁴⁰ "У границ Афганистана с СНГ сосредоточено порядка 4, 5 тыс. боевиков" ["Around 4,500 militants are concentrated at Afghanistan's border with the CIS"], TASS, 12 November 2015.

⁴¹ Ayaz Gul, "Afghan Official: Over 1,300 Foreign Fighters in Kunduz Battle", Voice of America, 15 November 2015.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, senior European diplomat, Bishkek, December 2015.

⁴³ Crisis Group email correspondence, Moscow-based political analyst, November 2015.

⁴⁴ Tajikistan borders both Badakhshan and Kunduz.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, May 2015.

stan but may try to take advantage of weaknesses in Tajikistan to gain a foothold on the way to the Ferghana Valley.⁴⁶ Dushanbe fears this might attract support from disgruntled ex-UTO members.

At a CIS October summit in Kazakhstan, Russian President Vladimir Putin said the situation in Afghanistan is critical, and the militants' goal is Central Asia.⁴⁷ Moscow has pledged extensive military-technical aid, but it is unclear what has been delivered. The military base in Tajikistan, its largest abroad, will be increased from 5,900 men to 9,000 by 2020.⁴⁸ It has "advanced warplanes, attack helicopters, and unmanned drones", part of a "three-layer-deep defence" backing up the Tajiks and their Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) advisers.⁴⁹ In May, the CSTO conducted a 2,500-strong counter-terrorism drill for its Collective Rapid Reaction Force (KSOR) in southern Tajikistan, practicing putting down an invasion of 700 Islamist militants from northern Afghanistan.⁵⁰

Russia has also bolstered its military presence closer to Dushanbe. In October, it said it would station attack and transport helicopters at the Ayni airfield 30km from the capital,⁵¹ and in November the 149th Motor Rifle Regiment was moved from Kulyob, some 40km from the Afghan border to 25km south of Dushanbe.⁵² This suggests it is conscious of the multiple threats to Tajikistan. A Russian diplomat said, "Tajikistan can have the legal help of Russia if the threat comes from outside. The problem is if the enemy is inside, and we don't have a mandate [to intervene] This is [Rahmon's] internal problem We cannot save him if he takes the wrong steps in internal policy".⁵³

Ironically, success in the Afghan peace process could create risks for Tajikistan. A settlement between the Kabul government and the Taliban would likely exclude armed groups such as the IMU and others with foreign fighters, causing some to cross into Central Asia.⁵⁴ A Tajik border-district official said a peace deal that overlooked

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dushanbe, June 2015. See also, Merhat Sharipzhan, "IMU Declares It Is Now Part of the Islamic State", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), 6 August 2015.

⁴⁷ "Путин: одна из целей боевиков – попасть в Центрально-Азиатский регион" ["Putin: one of the goals of the militants is to enter the Central Asian region"], RIA Novosti, 16 October 2015.

⁴⁸ "Численный состав 201 РВБ в Таджикистане доведут до 9000 человек" ["Troops in 201st Russian military base in Tajikistan will be increased up to 9,000"], Radio Ozodi, 2 April 2015. The 201st actually includes three bases in Dushanbe and Khatlon province relatively near the Afghan border. In the 2012 basing agreement, Tajikistan waived rent in return for military and counter-narcotics aid.

⁴⁹ "Tajikistan: the far outpost of great powers", RFE/RL, 21 July 2015.

⁵⁰ "Контингенты КСОР ОДКБ в Таджикистане на полигоне 'Харбмайдон' завершили активную фазу практических действий внезапной проверки боевой готовности" ["RRF Contingent of CSTO completed active phase of practical actions of sudden military readiness check on Kharbmaydon polygon in Tajikistan"], CSTO press release, 19 May 2015.

⁵¹ Nastya Berezina, "Россия усилит военную базу в Таджикистане после встречи Путина с Рахмоном" ["Russia will strengthen the military base in Tajikistan after the meeting of Putin with Rahmon"], RBC, 7 October 2015.

⁵² "Российская 201 военная база перевела свое подразделение из Куляба в Ляур" ["Russian 201st military base has moved its unit from Kulyob to Lyaur"], Radio Ozodi, 19 November 2015.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, Russian diplomat, October 2015. In theory, a Russian president could seek approval under Article 102 of the constitution, which allows use of Russian troops abroad.

⁵⁴ Margaritta Stancati and Nathan Hodge, "Islamic State Ally Emerges As Threat to Afghanistan, Central Asia", *Wall Street Journal*, 18 August 2015.

foreign fighters could be disastrous for Dushanbe.⁵⁵ Central Asian states are ill-prepared for a return of militants, whether by incursion or retreat. Their security services and legal systems would be overwhelmed and likely respond counter-productively.⁵⁶ Any Afghan settlement should thus ensure that its disarmament, disbandment and rehabilitation program is broad enough to include foreign fighters.

B. *Drugs*

Insecurity and lawlessness in Afghanistan combined with corruption on both sides of the border fuel drug trafficking through Tajikistan. Low seizures suggest complicity in the trade among the structures responsible for countering it. The situation appears to be worsening. In 2008, Tajikistan intercepted 1.45 tons of heroin, in 2014 just 508 kg.⁵⁷ The head of its Drug Control Agency (DCA), Gen. Rustam Nazarov, admitted that some employees have collaborated with smugglers but denied that “any government official ... is ‘supporting’ or ‘protecting’ any organised group of [drug] traffickers”.⁵⁸ Most foreign diplomats and counter-narcotics experts view such statements with scepticism.⁵⁹

Drugs trafficking directly impacts Tajikistan’s border security and internal stability. Experts argue that the trade has become foundational to the state, as it provides income – and 20 to 30 per cent of GDP – that can be redistributed or laundered through the economy.⁶⁰ But the absence of legitimate economic development has political and security implications, and control of lucrative routes is a source of rivalry between regional elites and within corrupted security services.⁶¹

Western and Russian aid to bolster border security and counter drug trafficking has not been adequately coordinated and has had limited impact.⁶² Privately, experts working in Tajikistan say the impact is compromised partly by conflicts of interest in Dushanbe. The EU-funded Border Management for Central Asia (BOMCA) program, the OSCE’s Border Management Staff College, the UN International Organization for Migration (IOM) border projects and bilateral, mainly U.S., security aid and training

⁵⁵ “The presence of Central Asians would be a headache for Afghanistan. These people will not be going to China [or anywhere else] but back to Central Asia”. Crisis Group interview, Khatlon province, July 2015.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group Briefing, *Syria Calling*, op. cit.

⁵⁷ “Country Report: Tajikistan”, 2014 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR), U.S. Department of State; see also the 2015 edition of the INCSR.

⁵⁸ “Назаров: ‘Мақомоти баландпояи тоҷик бо қочоқчиён ҳамдаст нестанд’” [“Nazarov: ‘high level Tajik officials are not complicit with (drug) traffickers’”], BBC, 27 August 2013.

⁵⁹ “Many believe, however, that significant amounts of narcotics move through Tajikistan with the support of corrupt law enforcement and government officials Arrests and prosecutions of traffickers remained relatively few, and those that did take place were presumed to target small independent operators rather than major traffickers”. INCSR, 2015, op. cit, p. 288

⁶⁰ Crisis Group email correspondence, Western academic, July 2015. “Slowing Growth, Rising Uncertainties”, Tajikistan Economic Update No. 1, World Bank Group, spring 2015; “Country Report: Tajikistan, 2014”, op. cit.

⁶¹ Events in Khorog in 2012 were linked to the drugs trade. Crisis Group telephone interview, Khorog resident, May 2014.

⁶² Geopolitical rivalries are partly responsible. Elena Chernenko, “Антинаркотическую инициативу заблокировали в Вене” [“Antinarcotics initiative was blocked in Vienna”], *Kommer-sant*, 12 February 2012; Sebastien Peyrouse, “Drug Trafficking in Central Asia. A Poorly Considered Fight?”, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo no. 218, September 2012.

are estimated to have cost \$83 million in 2005-2013.⁶³ However, a European diplomat said border security and management projects, BOMCA included, “lack active implementation” by the Tajiks.⁶⁴

U.S. foreign policy goals in Central Asia and the practical measures to achieve them such as aid have been over-shadowed by military-strategic objectives in Afghanistan for more than a decade. The U.S. and some EU states have relied on close cooperation with repressive regional governments to obtain logistical support for Afghan operations, often turning a blind eye to human rights. But the relative ineffectiveness of counter-narcotics aid coupled with increasing repression in Tajikistan should prompt a reassessment.

The U.S. gave the Tajik DCA \$11.3 million between 2003 and 2014; current expenditure includes a \$700,000 annual salary supplement to fund a narcotics interdiction unit.⁶⁵ Since 2007, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) has given \$130 million under counter-narcotics programs.⁶⁶ In July 2015, the U.S. donated 87 vehicles worth \$5.7 million to the security services, including the GKNB, DCA, internal affairs ministry and Border Guard Administration, all involved in counter-narcotics.⁶⁷ The GKNB and the ministry are persistent human rights violators, including widespread torture, deaths in custody and occasional extrajudicial executions.⁶⁸ A Western academic, critical of the approach, said, “the U.S. should not so easily accept the actions of the Tajik government. American-trained Tajik forces support the president, shelter the drug trade and extort and torture the people”.⁶⁹ Institutional capacity building in the security sector should be accompanied by technical help and training, as well as comprehensive political dialogue about strategies to deal with instability factors.

III. External Relations

While the EU, U.S. and China have less leverage than Moscow, Tajikistan is so fragile that they should consider a serious conflict prevention effort, in cooperation with Moscow, over the short to medium term. Migrants and border security underpin the Moscow-Dushanbe dynamic. Russia is concerned by Rahmon’s authoritarian trajectory but only in so far as it could trigger domestic instability. Aside from concerns about Xinjiang’s security, China’s interests are largely commercial – it is Tajikistan’s most important investor – but it privately expresses worry about the country’s vulnerabilities, both external and internal.⁷⁰ International actors run the risk of mistaking the appearance of stability for a long-term solution. Tajikistan’s feckless government,

⁶³ Jafar Usmonov, “The Effects on Tajikistan of Security Developments in Afghanistan since 2001”, *Security and Human Rights*, vol. 24 (2013), pp. 149-158.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, 2015.

⁶⁵ “Country Report: Tajikistan, 2014”, op. cit.; “Inspection of Embassy, Dushanbe, Tajikistan”, U.S. Department of State, Office of Inspector General, OIG Highlights, March 2015.

⁶⁶ The State Department and CENTCOM consult, but CENTCOM decides the fund allocation.

⁶⁷ “U.S. Embassy Donates 87 Vehicles to Tajikistan’s Counter-Narcotics Agencies”, press release, Dushanbe, 8 July 2015; “Tajikistan Scen setter for visit of General David Petraeus”, U.S. embassy Dushanbe cable, 19 October 2009, as made public by WikiLeaks.

⁶⁸ “Tajikistan: Torture and Other Ill-treatment of People Deprived of Their Liberty and Deaths in Custody”, Amnesty International and Tajikistan Anti-Torture Coalition, 2013.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group email correspondence, Western academic, November 2015.

⁷⁰ See Crisis Group Asia Report N°244, *China’s Central Asia Problem*, 27 February 2013.

preoccupied with self-enrichment and self-preservation, is as potent a threat to the state as a possible incursion from Afghanistan.

Moscow is unlikely to ask reforms from Rahmon that would transform the state or its governance system. This reflects immediate security considerations, relative tolerance of bad governance and a broader goal of integrating Tajikistan into its orbit through membership of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Tajik and international observers see EEU membership as a matter of when, not if. Nevertheless, a strategy of maintaining the status quo, in part to foster stability but mostly to retain influence, may eventually backfire.

The EU and U.S. wield much less influence and have not been robust in applying conditionality to the cooperation and technical aid they provide. The EU's relations under the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement ratified in 2010 seek to be comprehensive and include "the facilitation of economic transition for Tajikistan, and the promotion of inclusive, sustainable human and economic development". Brussels helps with structural reform, including through budget support, but also an enhanced human rights dialogue.⁷¹ Its strategy has not yet gained traction, however, with Central Asian states like Tajikistan that have little to trade and no appetite for genuine governance reforms.

U.S. cooperation has focused mainly on the defence and law enforcement sectors, local governance and transparency, but reform often comes second to the Afghanistan priority. Failure to address human rights abuses publicly in Uzbekistan, a more strategic partner, while commenting on Tajikistan's raises questions about the evenhandedness of the approach to Central Asia.⁷²

Rahmon's presidential term ends in 2020, though he will continue to exert considerable influence whatever the transition arrangement. The West should encourage Dushanbe and Moscow to negotiate a way forward toward more accountable governance that ultimately prepares an orderly transition in the interest of regional stability. The OSCE and the UN offer platforms for such dialogue; Russia and the West have common regional interests in stability, security and preventing conflict and the spread of Islamic extremism.

The West should prioritise accountability in every aspect of its relationship with Dushanbe. Human rights abuses, corruption and shrinking democratic space ought to be spotlighted for substantive discussions, including as part of the EU's enhanced dialogue on human rights dialogue with Tajikistan and its regional security dialogue on security issues. EU and U.S. aid should be tracked and corruption not tolerated.⁷³ No opportunity, private or public – such as the UN's upcoming Universal Periodic Review of Tajikistan – should be missed to put on record the government's mismanagement of its international and domestic obligations. Russia should invest in its own and regional security by urging Rahmon to recall the 1997 peace agreement's ambitions and enact economic reforms aimed at job creation and relaxing pressures on devout Muslims. Tajik authorities at the highest level will resist but have little room

⁷¹ "EU-Tajikistan Relations – Factsheet", European External Action Service, Brussels, 21 December 2015. http://eeas.europa.eu/factsheets/docs/eu-tajikistan_factsheet_en.pdf.

⁷² "U.S. Relations with Tajikistan, Factsheet"; State Department, 21 February 2015. "Kerry meets Uzbekistan leader, seen as one of world's most repressive", *The Guardian*, 1 November 2015.

⁷³ "Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions", Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy, European Commission, EU High Representative, foreign affairs and security policy, 18 November 2015. Crisis Group Report, *Tajikistan: On the Road to Failure*, op. cit.

for manoeuvre if Moscow makes the connection between political and religious crack-down, increasing radicalisation, security service fissures and the increasing state brittleness.

Rahmon, so long in power and at age 63, should be thinking about his legacy. Transition need not be abrupt but should be on the radar. The recently signed law granting him the title of “Founder of Peace and Harmony: Leader of the Nation” and other privileges for him and his family, such as immunity from prosecution for life, indicates he may be looking beyond his presidency.⁷⁴

It is in Russia’s security interests that any change is managed democratically and credibly. It is also in the interests of the West and immediate neighbours that his authoritarianism and the challenge it poses to long-term stability are tempered. Since Dushanbe is unlikely to offer reforms on its own or easily countenance transition, its partners should work incrementally to prevent a violent transition and achieve a less authoritarian, post-Rahmon era. The foundation of their approach should be recognition of the link between Rahmon’s repression and insecurity. Due to Afghan developments and Tajik military weakness, consensus on securing that border is needed, including the CSTO’s lead role. Russia would also do well to re-engage with international efforts to stem the drugs flow. Misgivings about Moscow’s regional ambitions elsewhere are valid, but preventing conflict in Tajikistan is a common interest.

IV. Conclusion

Peace and stability are under threat in Tajikistan. External factors such as the uptick in violence in northern Afghanistan are a real challenge, but the most immediate danger is being generated in Dushanbe. President Rahmon’s elimination of the IRPT, stranglehold on religion and targeting of ex-UTO officials have undermined the legacy of the 1997 peace deal, causing grievances and prompting Islamic radicalisation. Failure to enact economic reforms has left the government dependent on remittances from migrant workers in Russia, an unreliable source of income in the current economic climate; rampant drug trafficking and the corruption of the Tajik security services expose Central Asia to serious risk.

Rahmon’s focus on maintaining power drives policy, while the government functions to perpetuate its privileges. Western influence is limited; Russia, though increasingly sceptical of the president, views Tajikistan as a buffer against Islamic militants in Afghanistan. Rahmon is rarely held accountable for his excesses, but Tajikistan’s partners would be short-sighted to ignore them. The West should increase scrutiny of Tajikistan’s international law obligations and voice concerns both privately and publicly. Financial aid should be carefully monitored and withheld if mismanagement and corruption remain unaddressed. Russia, with a strong vested interest in Tajikistan’s domestic stability, can bring useful pressure to bear. However, it will not be easy for any actor to prompt reform, and in its absence, the West, Russia and Tajikistan’s neighbours should prepare for a difficult, potentially violent political transition.

Bishkek/Brussels, 11 January 2016

⁷⁴ “Эмомали Рахмон принял статус ‘Лидера нации’” [“Emomali Rahmon accepted status of ‘leader of the nation’”], Radio Ozodi 25 December 2015. The law is not unusual in Central Asia; similar guarantees have been given to Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev and his family.

Appendix A: Map of Tajikistan

