Nearing the brink?
Political instability in Tajikistan

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Cover photo: Landmarks in the Tajik capital Dushanbe. © Markus Göransson

About the author

Markus Göransson has a PhD in international politics from Aberystwyth University and has conducted extensive research in Tajikistan. He currently works as a freelance consultant in conflict research.

The Clingendael Institute
P.O. Box 93080
2509 AB The Hague
The Netherlands

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Abstract

Some observers have claimed that Tajikistan is on the verge of state collapse. Yet the regime of Tajik President Emomali Rahmon seems remarkably stable, buoyed by international support, its control over patronage and a war-weary and repressed public. Indeed, there is little evidence that a serious threat is brewing against it. Notwithstanding alarmist reports that home-grown and foreign-based militants are poised for an attack on Dushanbe, there is little verifiable evidence that an Islamist insurgency is in the making. Meanwhile, the domestic political opposition remains leaderless, divided and in many cases in prison or foreign exile.

Talk of the risk of state failure is in fact playing into the hands of the Rahmon regime. Under claims that it faces an Islamist challenge the regime has been able to negotiate military and economic support from Russia, China and the West. It has also escaped serious criticism of its human rights abuses from the United States and the EU, who fear losing their foothold in the Central Asian state. Instead, the regime has pushed on down the road of authoritarian consolidation, tightening its grip on a population that already suffers from the effects of an economic crisis.

The report argues that the current Western approach to Tajikistan has done little to temper the heavy-handedness of the regime and needs to be reviewed. A more assertive engagement should centre on: 1) refuting the Tajik regime’s fear-mongering about the Islamist threat, thereby undercutting a central justification of its repression and security build-up; 2) reaching out to other foreign stakeholders, notably China and Russia, in the joint pursuit of Tajik stability; and 3) taking steps to generate jobs in Tajikistan for labour migrants who return from joblessness in Russia.

Overall, Western countries should be realistic about the low risk of serious conflict in Tajikistan but at the same time take steps to relieve pressures stemming from the economic crisis and the Tajik government’s ill-conceived policies. Ironically, while there is little danger of an imminent meltdown in Tajikistan, there is a real risk of government overreach.
Introduction

Tajikistan on the edge?

If recent media and think tank reports are to be believed, the impoverished Central Asian state of Tajikistan is sliding towards disaster. It “teeters” on the edge of an “economic collapse”, said the international affairs journal Foreign Policy in May.¹ It is moving towards “state failure” and a possible Islamist insurgency, said the International Crisis Group (ICG) in an early-warning report in January.² It is facing the “prospect of a major expansion of Islamist militancy”, wrote Ahmed Rashid, a veteran war reporter with extensive experience of covering Central Asia, in a New York Times article published last summer, entitled “Jihad’s New Frontier: Tajikistan”.³

The problems are certainly piling up for the post-Soviet republic, which achieved independence in 1991, suffered a civil war between 1992 and 1997 and has endured economic troubles ever since. Its economy has taken a recent hit from economic recession in Russia, where more than a million Tajik migrants earn money for their families back home. The security situation is looking frailer following Taliban advances in northern Afghanistan, a stone’s throw from the Tajik border. There are fears of a social backlash due to hundreds of thousands of Tajik migrant workers having returned from Russia, with little prospect of finding work. Moreover, Western observers are doubtful that the Tajik government is up to handling the situation. It has responded to the growing problems by ratcheting up repression and consolidating its hold on the state apparatus, risking a backlash. Such developments have left foreign experts concerned about a violent blow-up in the fledgling Tajik state.⁴

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This report questions such claims. True, increased political repression and economic turmoil spell a bleak future for the Central Asian state. That future may well contain episodes of violence – a risk that needs to be addressed. But predictions of collapse downplay the staying power of the Tajik regime and exaggerate the gravity of the challenges it faces. This report considers the regime’s sources of power along with possible conflict-drivers in Tajikistan, arguing that although limited violence cannot be excluded there is little evidence that a serious threat is brewing against the stability of the Tajik state.
Tajikistan took its first steps as an independent state in 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed and gave rise to 15 new countries. Between 1992 and 1997 it was gripped by a civil war, which caused huge political and economic upheaval as well as untold destruction. Between 20,000 and 100,000 people are estimated to have been killed, while hundreds of thousands of people were displaced, many of them to Afghanistan, where some languished in refugee camps for years.

Ostensibly, the civil war pitted pro-Communist forces against a coalition of opposition groups, including democrats, nationalists and members of the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP). However, behind the scenes much of the initiative was held by local strongmen, who rallied troops and led the fighting. The peace agreement signed between the government and the opposition forces in June 1997 provided for the integration of many of the strongmen into official structures. Overall, it guaranteed the opposition 30% representation in state structures. The bulk of the positions fell into the hands of the IRP, which was the dominant force in the anti-government coalition.

The agreement brought much of the fighting to an end, even if some splinter groups remained opposed to it and on occasion challenged it by force of arms. But it proved to be an unstable construct. The circle around President Emomali Rahmon wasted no time in increasing its control and putting pressure on those who were not subordinate to it. The 1999 presidential election saw the president re-elected with an unlikely 97% of the vote in a contest marked by irregularities. Constitutional amendments in subsequent years reinforced his legal powers while a spate of assassinations cleared the field of possible rivals in both government and opposition circles. With his control of patronage, Rahmon bought off erstwhile opponents, widening his personal network and weakening the opposition. Electoral outcomes, too, curtailed the influence of the Islamic Renaissance Party, which gained only two seats in the national assembly in the

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2000 parliamentary elections – elections deemed by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) not to have met basic democratic standards.\(^9\)

The effectiveness with which the opposition was marginalised owed much to the latter’s disunity. The United Tajik Opposition (UTO), a signatory to the 1997 peace agreement, was not a cohesive entity but had been set up as a united front for the opposition in its negotiations with the government. It masked deeper divisions between political leaders and local power-holders that could be exploited by the government. This was one reason why the government was able to expel or reassign numerous UTO figures in later years without meeting much organised resistance from the opposition as a whole.\(^10\)

As well as politicking, the government has resorted to military force to impose its authority. There have been numerous episodes of armed violence since 1997, including in Khujand in 1999, in Dushanbe in 2001, in Kulob in 2008, in Karategin in 2009 and 2010, and in Khorugh in 2012. Some of the clashes were portrayed as Islamist-fuelled but can more adequately be described as showdowns between the regime and groups thought to threaten it. In Karategin and Khorugh, state counter-insurgency forces were deployed to root out individuals who had retained local autonomy after the 1997 settlement, one goal being to extend the writ of the government over areas where it had incomplete control.

Through its manoeuvrings, the ruling circle has increased its control over Tajikistan. That control is contingent, incomplete and dependent on deals with local power-holders. It has not done away with tensions and fractures that remained after 1997 and that have been at the heart of much of the violence that has erupted in the past two decades. The risk of new flare-ups remains real, particularly in more peripheral places such as Khorugh, where the 2012 military operation galvanised local resistance.

Nevertheless, the Tajik regime is more stable and entrenched than commonly assumed, while its adversaries remain weak and divided. Indeed, the post-war settlement, based on power-sharing between the government and its major opponents, has gradually been whittled away. The government has neutralised most of its erstwhile adversaries or drawn them into its patron–client relations. Rahmon remains the centre of political patronage and has secured the backing of economic elites, the official Islamic clergy and many state officials who depend on being in his good graces for their positions. Others have been killed, including the former UTO field commanders Mirzo Ziyoyev, Mullah Abdullah, Alovuddin Davlatov and the brothers Bahrom and Rizvon Sodirov –


or imprisoned, including Gaffar Mirzoyev and Yakub Salimov, once allies of Rahmon. Meanwhile, Rahmon has appointed family members and relatives to senior positions, including his brother-in-law, who heads Tajikistan’s main commercial bank; his son, Rustam, who runs the country’s anti-corruption bureau; his daughter Ozoda, who was made his chief of staff in January; and the latter's husband, who is deputy head of the national bank.\textsuperscript{11}

Since the civil war, Tajikistan has gone from being a country with a highly fractured political space to one where the regime is fast consolidating its position. Today, few if any rival sites of political authority exist. Even though the plight of most Tajiks is worse than it has been for many years, there seems to be little scope for a serious challenge to Rahmon's position as long as the foundations of his power remain intact.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|}
\hline
\textbf{Tajikistan's elites to watch} \\
\hline
\textbf{Emomali Rahmon} – long-time autocratic leader of Tajikistan, who attained power during the Tajik Civil War (1992-97) and has steadily cemented it since then. In May 2016, he was granted limitless terms and the title of “Leader of the nation” in a referendum. \\
\textbf{Muhiddin Kabiri} – Chairman of the banned Islamic Renaissance Party, who is widely considered a moderate figure and who advocated a conciliatory line towards the government. He lives in exile abroad. \\
\textbf{Mahmadali Hayit} – Deputy chairman of the Islamic Renaissance Party and formerly a prominent figure in the United Tajik Opposition during the civil war. In June 2016 he was sentenced to life in prison on charges of involvement in an alleged coup attempt. \\
\textbf{Mahmadsaid Ubaydulloyev} – Mayor of Dushanbe and the chairman of the Upper House of the Tajik Parliament. He is one of few prominent regime figures with an independent power base. \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{11} RFE/RL Tajik Service, “Tajik President appoints daughter chief of staff, seen as move to consolidate power”, 27 January 2016, \url{http://www.rferl.org/content/tajikistan-rahmon-daughter-chief-of-staff-consolidate-power/27514819.html}. 
2 Regime power is strongly underpinned

The authority of the Tajik regime rests arguably on four main pillars: 1) foreign support, 2) political patronage, 3) Tajik nationalism, and 4) war-weariness. There is little to suggest this will change in the foreseeable future, making the alarmist forecasts for Tajikistan debatable.

2.1 Foreign military and economic support

Tajikistan has been able to amass foreign military and economic support thanks to its strategic location and perceived fragility. Its 1,300-km border with Afghanistan has been viewed by foreign powers as both an opportunity and a liability. Between 2001 and 2014, the United States and its allies used Tajikistan as a bridgehead for the ISAF mission in Afghanistan. But they have also funnelled military support to Dushanbe for the purpose of preventing a violent spillover from its southern neighbour.

Anxieties over Afghanistan have been central to Russian strategic thinking, too. Moscow maintains one of its largest military forces outside of Russia in Tajikistan, where the 201st Motorised Rifle Division has been stationed since the end of the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–89) as a bulwark against intrusions from Afghanistan. Following heightened instability in northern Afghanistan this year and last, moves were made to expand that presence, including in June, when a new shipment of military vehicles was offered to Dushanbe.12

Foreign military support has strengthened the coercive powers of Dushanbe, whose martial might would be far slighter without it. True, the Russian forces have no mandate to intervene against domestic threats but they represent a powerful show of support to the regime, are potentially fungible and arguably act as a deterrent to any foreign militants who contemplate pushing into Tajikistan. Meanwhile, US-trained troops have been used in unintended ways. Dushanbe’s July 2012 crackdown in Khorugh was

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spearheaded by US-trained special forces. The same was true for the manhunt for former deputy defence minister Abduhalim Nazarzoda in September 2015. Apparently, Nazarzoda fled with a group of followers when he discovered he was wanted for arrest. Rather than face detention, he took to the mountains near Dushanbe, where he engaged state forces in a final battle that claimed his life.

Alongside military support, foreign countries have disbursed development aid to Tajikistan. For 2015, total commitments were 540 million USD – 6% of GDP – at a time when Tajikistan ranked 129th of 188 on the Human Development Index. Such aid has numerous effects beyond funding development. First, a portion of it is diverted by corrupt officials who use it to line their pockets and finance patronage networks. It strengthens informal mechanisms of power and provides an additional source of income for a regime heavily reliant on patronage. Second, it gives the government the chance to take credit for externally financed projects, pointing at improvements in service provision and living standards to bolster its prestige. Third, being fungible, aid may free up resources for less legitimate uses, helping to bankroll authoritarian and corrupt practices. The researcher Filippo de Danieli has suggested that international counter-narcotics assistance, for instance, has permitted the Tajik regime to spend more resources on maintaining social control while it ostensibly acts to meet its international obligations.

Finally, international peace-building efforts have not only failed to counter authoritarian politics in Tajikistan but may have helped to legitimise it. This is suggested by John Heathershaw, a leading expert on post-civil war Tajikistan, who notes that many democracy- and peace-building initiatives have been derailed by regime actors, who use them as opportunities to affirm the dominance of the regime and the subordination of opposition voices. At meetings between regime and civil society groups, government representatives have routinely taken charge, relegating independent actors to the margins. The regime’s outward playing-along with peace-building initiatives helps,

according to Heathershaw, to “keep international aid flowing and sustain[s] the Tajikistani state as a sovereign and legitimate member of the international community.”

2.2 Political patronage

More to the point, the ruling circle uses patronage to secure support. It does so through its control of government appointments – “one of the few paths to even moderate enrichment”, according to an ICG report – and key economic assets in the country. A part of the value of some of the economic assets is diverted into foreign shell companies reportedly set up for the benefit of the ruling elite. For instance, the Tajik aluminium company, TALCO, the largest industrial enterprise in Tajikistan and once estimated to account for one-third of the country’s GDP, operates as part of an offshore arrangement that saw an estimated one billion USD redirected from TALCO into a shell company in the British Virgin Islands between 2005 and 2008 alone. While the nature of the ownership of the shell company is shrouded in secrecy, TALCO is under Rahmon’s control, indicating that the arrangement exists with his approval. Certainly, there has been much speculation that offshore companies are used as personal slush funds by regime figures to reinforce their powers of patronage, among other purposes. In the case of TALCO, the British Virgin Islands-based company buys the company’s produce for a modest fee, then resells it on world markets. The details of this arrangement remain opaque, but the de-nationalisation of a part of Tajikistan’s economic wealth – in ways that are consistent with international financial regulations – at the very least removes it by one step from domestic political and bureaucratic processes and increases opportunities for economic predation.

19 Ibid., p. 1332.
22 John Heathershaw and Edmund Herzig (eds), The Transformation of Tajikistan, Routledge, 2012, p. 12. This and much other information was made public during a trial at the London High Court over alleged bribery and corruption in TALCO. The court proceedings provide a rare glimpse into the offshore arrangements in which several Central Asian governments are involved. See David Trilling, “Russian aluminum giant pries open books at Tajikistan’s largest factory”, 9 June 2014, http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68466.
24 Trilling, op.cit.
2.3 Tajik nationalism

The Rahmon regime has shed its Communist guise since the civil war and has played up its nationalist credentials. It now casts itself as the guardian of the nation and a bulwark against foreign interference. Ruling the only Persianate country in post-Soviet Central Asia, it promotes a discourse of Turkic encirclement, pointing at bellicose posturing by Uzbekistan, among other things, as evidence of Tajikistan’s precarious position.

It is difficult to gauge the discourse’s popular traction, but researchers such as Heathershaw and Edmund Herzig believe it to have considerable currency. By portraying Tajikistan as a fledgling state surrounded by scheming Turks, the regime maintains a rhetoric of vulnerability. It is used to justify its strong-fisted rule and to support claims that it alone can guarantee Tajikistan’s future prosperity. This discourse has recently been reinvigorated by the alleged threat posed by Islamic militants. That perceived menace is used as a counterpoint to the regime’s secular vision of Tajik nationality, offering a tool to mobilise people around the official interpretation of Tajik nationhood and statehood.

2.4 War-weariness

There is widespread fear of renewed conflict in Tajikistan, where the civil war has left the population with a deep trauma. That fear seems to act as a deterrent to political militancy. Certainly, opposition figures, citing their commitment to peace, have shown astonishing restraint in the past when faced with the heavy hand of the government. For instance, the leadership of the Islamic Renaissance Party has been remarkably conciliatory towards the regime, even to the point of requesting President Rahmon’s support when it defended itself against heavy pressure from the government last summer. Presumably, the party’s leaders understood that a more militant stance would have won little favour from the war-weary public. Nevertheless, in the end, their appeal proved futile. The party was banned and declared a terrorist organisation. Much of the leadership was imprisoned.

To keep the memory of the civil war fresh, state television regularly airs footage of the conflict. State-written religious sermons have endorsed the official narrative, blaming the war on the opposition. State-controlled media have portrayed Rahmon as the

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sole peace-maker, conveniently forgetting that the now-deceased former IRP head, Said Abdullo Nuri, was also instrumental in ending the war.

One implicit message in the commemorations is that political division breeds instability. Responsibility for the civil war is laid at the feet of the opposition groups who challenged the central government’s authority in 1990–92. This interpretation, which has wide resonance in Tajik society, places the onus for stability in Tajikistan squarely on the shoulders of non-state actors. It is also a tacit reminder to would-be dissenters of the high stakes that political opposition entails.
3 Growing problems

Despite the regime’s firm grip on the country, there is no shortage of problems in this most impoverished of former Soviet republics, which is also the most remittance-dependent country in the world, with around 50% of its GDP composed of money sent home by migrant workers in Russia and Kazakhstan. The recent economic downturn in Russia has caused many Tajik migrants to lose their jobs, compelling many of them to return home, where they face uncertain job prospects.

The loss of migrant jobs and the collapse of the Russian rouble have, in combination, led to a distinct fall in transfers to Tajikistan. In the first half of 2015, that fall was estimated by the World Bank at 17.5% in Tajikistan Somoni terms (in US dollar terms it was a more dramatic 32%). Household incomes have been hit especially hard, with many families being forced to cut non-priority expenditures. The World Bank reported that 83% of Tajik households depend in part on remittances, most of them for immediate consumption.

Sluggish job creation has compounded the problem. The Tajik government has received criticism for failing to implement structural reforms, which might have assisted the emergence of a more dynamic domestic labour market. Although unemployment stood at just 2.4% in March 2016 according to official statistics, the International Labour Organization has published data suggesting the real figure may be closer to 10%. Neither figure accounts for underemployment, which is likely to be considerable. Nor do they say anything about low wages, with the average monthly Tajik salary amounting to just 967.5 Somoni (roughly 110 EUR) in March 2016. Such numbers fuel anxieties about an impending social backlash. If migrant work was a convenient safety valve for ridding the country of potentially troublesome young men, their return in large numbers to a job

29 Ibid.
market unable to absorb them may portend future instability. Although the economic problems may not breed instability in the short term, if left unaddressed, they may well prove to be a source of long-term social turmoil.

Another potential source of trouble is the narcotics trafficking from Afghanistan. Reportedly, around 25% of Afghan opiates pass through Central Asia on their way to markets in Kazakhstan and Russia, most of them traversing Tajikistan. This trade originated during the Tajik civil war (1992–97), when much of the 1,300-km border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan lay wide open. Today it is a thriving business that has led to the emergence of powerful organised crime networks with tentacles that stretch into the halls of official power. Competition between groups involved in the drug trade may have been at the heart of a number of violent incidents on Tajik territory and along the Tajik–Afghan border in the past. The Tajik regime has maintained itself in power partly by tacitly accepting the drug trade, which is discussed below. Nevertheless, it needs to walk a fine line between maintaining the equilibrium in the drug business and reassuring foreign governments, including Russia, that it is doing its best to stem the flow of drugs.

Growing Taliban activity in northern Afghanistan has fuelled concerns that Tajikistan may be facing a spillover of violence from its southern neighbour. In January, the ICG said a “significant number” of Central Asian fighters had recently moved from Pakistan into Afghanistan’s northern Badakhshan Province, from where they helped to stage attacks along the Tajik border. The fall of Kunduz, a city within spitting distance of the border, to Taliban forces last September was a shock to the Afghan security establishment. Though the city was soon recaptured, its seizure was a display of Taliban strength at uncomfortable proximity to Tajikistan.

Islamist militancy has reared its head elsewhere, too. Hundreds of Tajiks have joined ISIS/Daesh, causing anxiety that Tajikistan may become a target of future terrorist attacks. In 2015, the Tajik interior ministry estimated that some 500 Tajiks had joined the

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terror organisation. Of these, the most high-profile individual was General Gulmurod Khalimov, the American-trained head of the Special Assignment Police Unit, who left for Syria in May 2015 and on his arrival immediately denounced the Tajik regime. His defection shocked the Tajik political establishment. The ICG writes that it “badly wounded Rahmon’s sense of security”. It certainly raises questions about Rahmon’s control over his security bodies and the growing appeal of violent Islamism in Tajikistan.

The regime’s response to the mounting economic, social and security challenges has not inspired confidence. The government has shown little inclination to address poverty and corruption but has instead sought to consolidate its own position. A venal and cronyist entity, it has gradually obliterated nearly all other sites of power, removing most alternative channels for expressing discontent. The culmination of the campaign came in August 2015, when the Islamic Renaissance Party, the last opposition party of any stature in Tajikistan, was banned and subsequently declared a terrorist organisation. This effectively turned Tajikistan into a one-party state. Meanwhile, at least one opposition leader in foreign exile has been assassinated by unknown assailants, while other exiled political activists have been extradited to Tajikistan, where they have been given lengthy prison spells.

Moreover, the government’s repression of political opponents has been accompanied by a crackdown on civil society. Lawyers, mosques and journalists have all felt the heat. This includes lawyers who have represented IRP members and other opposition figures. Ishoq Tabarov, who represented the opposition leader Zaid Saidov, a former industry minister who was imprisoned in 2013 over allegations of corruption and polygamy, died after two of his sons were sentenced to prison on what has been described as trumped-up charges. Other independent lawyers have themselves been jailed. Meanwhile, reports have emerged that family members of exiled activists have been arrested and harassed in Tajikistan.

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37 ICG, op. cit.
4 The warning flags in perspective

In its drive to consolidate power, the regime has triggered violence in the past. It may do so again with its most recent power grab. Indeed, the clash last year with ex-deputy defence minister Nazarzoda in the Rumit Gorge shows that the risk of violence is real. There are competing interpretations of the Nazarzoda incident but the most plausible suggests it occurred when the regime moved to eliminate an ex-opposition figure from the government. According to reports by Western analysts, the deputy defence minister was sought by the authorities who wanted to curtail the influence of ex-UTO figures in the government. Rather than accept arrest, Nazarzoda decided to go out with a bang.

Nevertheless, the growing problems in Tajikistan must be kept in context. The Rahmon regime remains in the driving seat, buoyed by international support and political patronage, among other things. Meanwhile, the opposition has been decimated following decades of repression and poses little threat, as was discussed earlier in this report. Nazarzoda’s last stand was a bold but badly prepared affair. The disbanding of the IRP went off bloodlessly without a hitch, suggesting a government in control and an opposition in disarray.

Moreover, narco-gangs may, counter-intuitively, support regime stability. Drug trafficking networks are locally embedded organisations with strategic interests. Usually, they emerge in isolated and peripheral regions where state power is weak. Well resourced with drug money, they are well placed to strike deals with the central government, acting as its extended arm in areas outside of its direct control. It is perhaps no surprise that Tajikistan has very low levels of drug-related violence (barring occasional clashes on the border) or that The Economist, among other commentators, considered the drug trade a force for stability in Tajikistan.

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42 Edward Lemon, “Tajikistan’s government uses recent violence to neutralize opposition”, Eurasia Daily Monitor 12, 23 September 2015, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=44407&cHash=5f95a548da6490312fa5d4f0624c6f1#V6sSYTYW1fY.

43 de Danieli, “Silk Road mafias”, op. cit.

The Taleban have moved uncomfortably close to the Tajik border but there is little evidence that they are harbouring expansionist aims. On 18 July, the Taleban issued a statement denying any aspiration “to interfere in the internal affairs of others.”\(^45\) A number of clashes along the Afghan–Tajik border have been blamed on Islamist fighters. But, like other incidents in the past, they may have more to do with narcotics smuggling or cash-strapped fighters who try to kidnap people for monetary gain than with an ambition to create instability in Tajikistan. There has certainly been little independent information to corroborate official claims, while the violence has been effectively contained by Tajik security forces. Meanwhile, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which did seek the overthrow of Central Asia’s secular regimes in the past, has been reduced, by ISAF bombings and counter-insurgency warfare, to a ghost of its former self.

Even if Afghan Islamists did push into Tajikistan, it seems unlikely that they would receive a warm welcome. The Tajik government has pointed to rising religious observance in Tajikistan as evidence that the Tajik population may be more receptive to militant ideology. However, as John Heathershaw and David Montgomery argued in a Chatham House report in November 2014, such reasoning rests on a conflation of terms of Islamisation, radicalisation and violent extremism.\(^46\) Although it is true that there has been an ongoing religious revival in Tajikistan since the end of the Stalinist era, that revival has been shaped by inherited Soviet notions of secularism, which maintain a sharp boundary between public politics and private religious practice. Incidents of violent extremism have remained few and far between since the Soviet collapse and need not be linked to the broader religious revival. In fact, the Taleban conquest of Kabul in 1996 provided a major impetus to the 1997 peace agreement in Tajikistan, while the Islamic Renaissance Party has recently maintained a clear secular profile, particularly under the chairmanship of the Russified intellectual Muhiddin Kabiri.

The recruitment of Tajiks to Daesh should also be kept in context. Tajikistan analyst Edward Lemon, a prolific writer about secular and religious politics in Tajikistan, notes that Tajik recruitment numbers remain comparatively low.\(^47\) Around 500 fighters, according to the Tajik interior ministry – one of the more liberal estimates – is considerably less as a proportion of the total Tajik Muslim population than the proportion of French or British Muslims who have enlisted in the terror organisation.\(^48\)


\(^{48}\) Ibid.
Moreover, despite the bravado of some Tajik fighters who have claimed they are ready to wage Jihad in Central Asia, the Daesh leadership is unlikely to release its Tajik recruits at a time when it is facing sustained pressure as part of a Western-backed military campaign.
Conclusion
Room for action

There has been much speculation in the past that Tajikistan will fail as a state. Repeatedly, this speculation has been proved premature. Enduring economic problems and persistent political tension have not threatened the foundations of stability in the country. True, a worrying number of armed clashes, most recently in Khorugh and the Rumit Gorge, have put observers on edge. But these conflicts, too, have been brief and strictly local.

Heartened by international backing and its control over patronage, the regime has stridden ahead to consolidate its position. Few of its excesses have met with serious push-back. The IRP caved in to government pressure, its leadership was imprisoned or forced into exile. There have been rumblings in some places, including Khorugh where anti-Dushanbe sentiment remains rife since the botched 2012 military operation. But it is difficult to see it translating into a broader challenge to the government as long as the would-be opposition remains leaderless, repressed and divided.

Still, it is no time for complacency. The situation in Tajikistan has patently taken a recent turn for the worse. The international community should remain unperturbed by the prospect of a possible blow-up yet take steps to ease pressures stemming from declining remittances, joblessness and political repression. In so doing, it should side-step government claims that the country is facing an existential threat from militant Islamists. Indeed, calming the waters in Tajikistan requires more assertive engagement with the Tajik regime and includes the following steps.

Challenge the Rahmon regime’s scare-mongering

Rahmon’s fear-mongering rhetoric about Islamist militancy is obscuring the real drivers of tension. It has allowed the Tajik regime to: 1) crack down on the opposition, including by banning the last remaining opposition party of any stature in Tajikistan, the Islamic Revival Party; 2) negotiate increased military and economic support from Russia and China; and 3) persuade Western actors and inter-governmental organisations such as the OSCE and the EU to turn a blind eye to political repression and other human rights abuses.
As a result, Rahmon’s excesses have met with little push-back from foreign actors. The banning of the IRP on legalistic grounds last year was met mostly by silence or hedged statements from Western diplomats. Earlier moves to manipulate elections earned the Tajik government only mild slaps on the wrist from international organisations such as the OSCE. Western actors are in a double bind. They have some strategic interests in this country that borders Afghanistan yet limited influence to shape the actions of the regime. This has allowed the tail to wag the dog as the Tajik regime has pushed on down the road of authoritarian consolidation, leaving Western actors privately appalled but publicly silent.

Where possible, Western actors should voice greater scepticism about official claims that Tajikistan is facing a militant Islamist threat. This would undercut one of the government’s attempts to justify its political repression and security build-up. Ironically, while there is little threat of large-scale insurgent violence, there is a real threat of government overreach.

**Joint action with Russia and China**

There may be little risk of imminent conflict in Tajikistan, but tensions are on the rise. To de-escalate them, Western countries should try to join with other international stakeholders. Russia, China and the West have conflicting goals elsewhere but share an interest in ensuring stability in Tajikistan. Indeed, working together in Tajikistan may provide some common ground between Russia and the West, whose relationship has been dominated recently by the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria. Together, foreign powers may press for the reversal of some of the most heavy-handed measures of the Rahmon government. One objective could be the release of civil-society activists and opposition politicians who have been imprisoned on trumped-up charges – including 13 top IRP members who were recently given lengthy prison spells. Another could be the lifting of restrictions on religious freedoms, which are needlessly causing frustration among observant Muslims.

Western actors have little independent influence in Tajikistan. But they do wield some power through their control of international aid and their ability to censure Tajikistan publicly and privately. Some of the private wealth of the Tajik political elite has been placed in offshore funds in the West, which may offer another source of leverage. Through these different avenues, it may be possible to temper the Tajik government’s repressive policies. European countries like the Netherlands can also offer technical
incentives to Dushanbe, including expertise in water management, so important in this country where hydropower is one of the largest economic resources.

**Stimulate job generation**

In general, more needs to be done to generate jobs in Tajikistan, expanding employment for returning migrants. This should be high on the priority lists of everyone with an interest in a stable Tajikistan, in order to stave off a possible social backlash when migrants return after finding themselves jobless in Russia, or others choose not to travel there in the first place. To contribute to job generation, the international community could step up economic investment, supporting small and medium-sized enterprises that operate relatively autonomously from the regime. The growing Chinese investments in Tajikistan constitute another entry point for stimulating job creation for Tajiks. Encouraging the Chinese, for example, to incorporate local employment quotas of the type proposed in Kyrgyzstan,\(^\text{50}\) might provide more jobs locally and allay fears that Chinese investment is creating employment mainly for ex-patriate Chinese. Finally, Western actors need to tighten controls on economic assistance, limiting opportunities for graft and increasing the likelihood that money is effectively spent. Audits that expose graft should prompt appropriate sanctions. In the past, independent audits of the Tajik national bank revealed serious cases of misappropriation of funds yet brought only weak reprimands.\(^\text{51}\) A 2009 audit by Ernst & Young found that the bank chairman Muradali Alimardon had diverted 550 million USD in undeclared loans. Despite this, Alimardon was promoted to deputy prime minister and the International Monetary Fund approved new loans to the Tajik financial sector.\(^\text{52}\) In 2015, *The Economist* reported that Alimardon again seemed to have siphoned off unapproved loans.\(^\text{53}\) Such misuse can and should lead to the imposition of sanctions.

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