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# VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND INSURGENCY IN TAJIKISTAN: A RISK ASSESSMENT

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# VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND INSURGENCY IN TAJIKISTAN: A RISK ASSESSMENT DRAFT



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## ACRONYMS

IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
IRP	Tajik Islamic Renaissance Party
OSCE	Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe
SSR	Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UTO	United Tajik Opposition
VEI	Violent Extremism and Insurgency
VIE	Violent Islamic Extremism

MAP



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report draws on and synthesizes published sources to assess the current and prospective risk of violent extremism and insurgency (VE/I) in Tajikistan. It does not attempt to offer an in-depth analysis of VEI in Tajikistan, but rather it seeks to provide an overview of key drivers, mitigants, actors, and trends in order to inform the future development of USAID's strategy and programs. The framework used to make this assessment is based on the *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism*, produced for USAID by Management Systems International (MSI).

**Context.** Ninety percent of Tajiks self-identify as Muslim. Most Tajik Muslims are followers of the Hanafi school of Islam. Four percent of Tajiks are Ismaili Shia. The widespread practice of Islam in Tajikistan belies a history of tense and often conflicting state-society relations. Tajikistan is unusual in the post-Soviet space in two critical respects. First, the influence of the muftiate as a lever of state power is limited. The inability of the state to control Islam through the muftiate has encouraged a degree of Islamic pluralism in Tajikistan that is absent elsewhere in Central Asia. Second, Tajikistan became home to a legal Islamic political party, the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), a development rare not only for the former Soviet Union, but also, at least until the recent Arab uprisings, rare for countries across much of the Muslim world. Critically however, Tajikistan's comparatively open religious environment has not precluded isolated acts of violent Islamist extremism (VIE) and, no less important, the Tajik government's levying charges of violent Islamist extremism against locally-based paramilitary organizations.

Tajikistan consistently scores poorly in international organizations' assessments of civil and political rights. Freedom House has, for the past decade, labeled Tajikistan as "not free" in its composite civil and political rights measure of regime type. Violations of religious human rights have been particularly pronounced in Tajikistan. The Rahmon government has outright banned several Islamic groups from organizing in Tajikistan. Salafism, as expansively understood by the Tajik government, was made illegal in 2009. The "Law on Parental Responsibility," passed in August 2011, makes it illegal for Tajiks under the age of 18 to attend mosque and, more broadly, "public religious activities with the exception of funerals." Islamic education is strictly controlled by the state, unregistered Islamic schools are routinely closed, and registered Islamic schools are closely monitored. In November 2010, the Tajik government went so far as to recall Tajiks studying Islam abroad in institutions like Egypt's Al-Azhar University.

**The IRP and IMU.** That we see any violent Islamist extremism in Tajikistan is likely due to the fact that those who would like to see Islam play a more prominent role in politics have been disappointed with the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) in the years since the 1997 peace accords. The IRP, in order to secure its position as a legal political party, was compelled to accept the secular nature of Tajik politics. The party's 1999 charter expressly stipulates that, were the IRP to win power, the party would not seek to replace the secular state with an Islamist government. The party has polled poorly in the three parliamentary elections held since the 1997 peace accords and its leader has acknowledged that the IRP's resonance in Tajik politics is limited to being a weak "catchall for voters unsatisfied with the government." The IRP, in short, is in a difficult if not inescapable bind. The party must embrace secularism to survive, a reality that makes Islamists dissatisfied. At the same time, secular voters continue to distrust the IRP due the enduring memory of the party's civil war militant Islamist leanings. Critically, growing societal dissatisfaction with the IRP opens political space for other, more militant groups. Most notable among these groups is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an organization—as its name suggests—whose presence in Tajikistan is as much a legacy of external politics as it is of the IRP's current inability to connect with Tajik society.

Establishing a clear understanding of the IMU today, along with its involvement in Tajik politics, is difficult. While multiple reporting sources allow confidence in concluding that Tajikistan has suffered several violent extremist attacks over the past decade, we have only the Tajik government's assessment that the perpetrators of these attacks can be linked to the IMU. Indeed, the motivations behind militancy and anti-state violence

are complex; while many of the militants in Tajikistan today were co-travelers—if not members—of the Islamic militant opposition that fought against the Rahmon government during the civil war, discourses of Islamic justice and Islamist extremism now, as equally they may have been then, can serve as convenient framings for all sides engaged in Tajikistan’s simmering state-society relations.

**Current risk.** While it is clear that violent extremism and insurgency exist in Tajikistan, it is unlikely that the violence and insurgency we see can be categorized as Islamist in origin. Many of the potential drivers of VEI identified in USAID’s *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism* are present in Tajik state-society relations. It should be noted that these drivers have been present in Tajik state-society relations for more than two decades and have not, with the possible exception of the 1992-1997 civil war, produced clear cases of Islamist-inspired violence and extremism. Of these five drivers, it is the first – political, economic, and social grievances – as well as the third – involvement in illicit economic activities – that have motivated individual Tajiks to challenge their government. Broader ideological objectives—the IRP’s and later the IMU’s avowed Islamism—may have at times mapped on to individual economic and political grievances.

While Tajikistan may exhibit several potential drivers of violent Islamist extremism, it is missing one critical driver: a population inclined to Islamist militancy. Disaffected young men overwhelmingly constitute the foot soldiers of Islamist militancy just as they do other forms of state-directed militancy. There is no shortage of disaffected young Tajik men. Most of these young men, however, are not in Tajikistan, but rather are economic migrants in Russia.

There are several other factors that suggest that ideologies of violent Islamist extremism find little resonance among the wider Tajik population. These factors include the readiness with which the IRP transitioned to a post-civil war secular party platform; the ease with which, in 2000, the former IRP commander-turned-Minister of Emergencies, Mirzo Ziyeyev, shipped the IMU militants encamped in Tajikistan off to Afghanistan; and the IMU’s inability to establish a base of operations in Tajikistan in the decade since.

Deep interpersonal ties exist throughout Tajikistan. Regions like Gorno-Badakhshan and Gharm are marked by social networks cemented by the enduring memory of civil war and by strong regional identities characteristic of communities actively seeking to remove themselves from disliked central government rule. Such associationalism is not determinative of violent extremism any more than it is of democracy or extreme nationalism. This associationalism is, however, permissive of extremism.

USAID’s *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism* also highlights seven “political drivers” that have the potential to shape and reshape society broadly. These drivers include: (1) denial of political rights and civil liberties; (2) violations of human rights; (3) widespread government corruption; (4) the presence of ungoverned territories; (5) a history of prior militant conflict; (6) external state support for domestic violent extremist groups; and (7) illegitimate yet unchallenged national governments. All seven of these political and societal-level drivers either are currently present or once were present in Tajikistan, a reality that further suggests the current state-society environment in Tajikistan is permissive, though by no means determinative, of VEI.

**Future risk.** The likelihood of violent Islamist extremism in Tajikistan over the short to medium term is low. The potential for insurgency, however, as the Tajikistan’s civil war experience as well as the more recent Rasht valley and Khorog conflicts demonstrate, remains high.

Potential drivers of VEI in Tajikistan exist at three levels. At the individual level, Tajiks might be likely in the future to consider VEI due to enduring political, economic, and social grievances and due to a desire to benefit from illicit economic activities. At the group level, Tajiks might be inclined to consider VEI if a charismatic and militant leader were to effectively capitalize on the many dense associational networks that define everyday life in the regions. And at the macro, state-society level, key political drivers—violations of political, civil and human rights, government corruption, the presence of ungoverned territories, Tajikistan’s

history of prior militant conflict, and the presence of an illegitimate yet unchallenged national government—create an environment permissive of violent extremism and already generative of insurgency.

Although individual-level drivers of VEI in Tajikistan are currently lacking, people are malleable and, given the right environment, Tajiks, like any population, can suddenly be mobilized in unexpected ways. Given the dense interpersonal networks that exist at the regional level throughout much of Tajikistan, one can imagine a future in which a charismatic leader capable of articulating a coherent and compelling message is able to mobilize followers to engage in acts of VEI just as one can equally imagine a charismatic leader mobilizing followers in support of democratic reform. Were Tajiks to come to believe the Rahmon government—perhaps due to its relationship with Western powers—was emblematic of democracy, it is conceivable that Islamist appeals might resonate more readily than do effete promises of democracy.

***Implications for the US Government (USG).*** The USG would do well to keep in mind the varying likelihoods for VEI in Tajikistan as it tailors its policies and development programs for this struggling Central Asian country. The greatest challenge to Tajik political reform—and as such, the greatest potential driver of VEI in Tajikistan—is the absence of a legitimate opposition to the widely disliked Rahmon government. This problem is compounded by the fact that, to the extent that any degree of political contestation exists in Tajikistan, this contestation is rooted in the regional and local levels and is altogether absent at the national level. Taken together, this absence of a national-level opposition and Tajikistan's pronounced regionalism is a recipe not only for insurgency, but also for state fragmentation. A USG program that assists Tajiks in developing national-level parties that are both legitimate and regionally inclusive would go some way in helping Tajikistan, in its third decade of independence, escape the illegitimate regimes and insurgent regions that defined its first two decades of post-Soviet existence.

## Summary Assessment of VE/I in Tajikistan

Key issues	Overall assessment	Explanatory note
<b>1. Current level of VEI activity</b>	Low	The state circumscribes the role of Islam in public life. Violence is not generally related to Islam, but instead to a combination of economic, political, and social grievances. It also stems from government attempts to dismantle or weaken regional patronage networks.
<b>2. Overall capacity of state and society to respond to VEI</b>	The state's response to Islamist activity is essentially repressive in nature. Societal actors are weak and constrained by state controls.	The state bans or tightly controls Islamic groups and activities. The IRP, though nominally Islamist, is essentially secular and therefore isn't a meaningful channel for Muslim aspirations.
<b>3. Likely trajectory of VEI over next 3-5 years</b>	The risk of VE/I is likely to remain low as long as government repression remains effective. The risk of conflict between the regime and regional warlords is high.	There is some potential for Islamic militants to capitalize on close-knit social networks to increase support for VE/I. Politically, the central government is unpopular but there is a lack of substantial opposition.
<b>4. Nature of the threat posed by VEI</b>	Islamist extremism currently does not pose a major risk to Tajikistan's development. However, the regime is vulnerable to regionally-based armed opposition. Broader public adoption of Islamic values might pose a threat to the corruption and patronage that characterize the existing political system.	While external powers have fomented and financed VE/I in the past, currently those most susceptible (ie, young Tajik men) are largely employed as migrant laborers in Russia. Corruption and patronage politics have long existed, and there is little substantive opposition to the regime.
<b>5. Implications for USG policies and programs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Keep an eye out for regional insurgency</li> <li>-Continue to focus efforts on local governance initiatives, civil society, media training, and human development</li> <li>-Develop program supporting national-level political parties.</li> </ul>	National level political parties can help assist in a move away from regionally-based politics that could lead the way to state fragmentation and exacerbate insurgency risk.

# I. BACKGROUND: THE INTERPLAY OF RELIGION AND POLITICS IN TAJIKISTAN

Assessing the potential risk of violent extremism and insurgency (VE/I) in Tajikistan requires an understanding of the complex interplay of religion and politics in Tajikistan. This section provides an overview of this interplay. It includes a discussion of the enduring legacies of the Soviet state's treatment of Islam in Tajikistan, the cross-border and mutually formative dynamic of Islamic mobilization in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and how the interaction of Islamism and regionalism gave rise to the 1992-1997 Tajik civil war.

## State and Islam: Legacies of Soviet Rule

Ninety percent of Tajiks self-identify as Muslim. Most Tajik Muslims are followers of the Hanafi school of Islam. Four percent of Tajiks are Ismaili Shia.<sup>1</sup> The widespread practice of Islam in Tajikistan belies a history of tense and often conflicting state-society relations.

Today's interplay of religion and politics in Tajikistan bears the imprint of the country's enduring Soviet legacy. Muslim elites, both formally and informally trained, enjoy a legitimacy that does not derive from the secular state and, as such, have long been perceived as suspect in the eyes of Tajikistan's secular rulers. During the Soviet period, Tajikistan's Moscow handlers addressed this challenge head-on and attempted to replace the Islamic idiom of legitimacy with a new, communist language of power. Justifying their actions as a campaign for female emancipation, in 1926 Moscow's appointees in Central Asia initiated the *hujum*, the "all-out attack" on Islam.<sup>2</sup> Tajik communist elites were compelled to unveil their wives and daughters and, more broadly, abandon outward markers of Islam. Central Asian political elites who did not comply were removed from office, tried in court, and often jailed.

Policing outward markers of religiosity is a practice that persists in Tajik state-society relations today. Government officials as well as public school teachers—with the exception of those older than 50—cannot have beards. The Tajik Ministry of Education, moreover, stipulated in 2010 that male students were required to shave and female students were prohibited from wearing the hijab.<sup>3</sup>

## Mutually Formative Islamic Mobilization in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan

States that fear their own legitimacy is weak—the Soviet regime in the 1920s or the Tajikistan's Rahmon government today—often proscribe outward displays of religiosity. The Soviet state, emboldened and united to a large degree through its experience in the Second World War, became more trusting of its position and thus, more open to Islam beginning in the 1950s. Central Asia's religious elites jailed in the 1930s and 1940s were released in the March 1953 prisoner amnesty.<sup>4</sup> Home from the gulags, Central Asia's imams discovered an environment in which a now-established Soviet secular elite was self-confident and thus more permissive of religious practice. These returning imams used this newly opened religious space to initiate a process of Islamic revival. Central Asia's Islamic elites were careful not to push the boundaries of Moscow's religious

<sup>1</sup> Data are from *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011—Tajikistan* (Washington, D.C: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2011) <<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm>> [accessed 21 January 2013].

<sup>2</sup> Gregory J. Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919-1929* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 229.

<sup>3</sup> 'Clampdown on Islam in Tajikistan', *BBC Monitoring*, 1 March 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Stephane A. Dudoignon, 'From Revival to Mutation: The Religious Personnel of Islam in Tajikistan, from de-Stalinization to Independence (1955-91)', *Central Asian Survey*, 30 (2011), 53-80 (p. 58) <[doi:10.1080/02634937.2011.557857](https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2011.557857)>.

tolerance too far. They did not challenge communist rule but, rather, operated within the institutional framework of the Central Asian Muslim Spiritual Board—the muftiate—that Stalin established in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in 1943.

In the 1950s and 1960s Tajikistan's Soviet imams emphasized a spiritual revival while, at the same time, remaining deferential to the predominately Uzbek religious elite of the Soviet muftiate.<sup>5</sup> In the 1970s this deferential stance began to shift. A new generation of Tajik imams began to question the muftiate's authority. Though predominantly Sunni like their Uzbek counterparts, Tajik imams, draw on Persian rather than Turkic language *tafsir*—exegeses of the Qur'an—and, as a result, increasingly came to resent the marginalization of their texts within the muftiate.<sup>6</sup>

The growing schism that emerged in the 1970s between the Uzbek-dominated Soviet muftiate and the Tajik religious elite is more than a curious fact of Soviet history; this divide to a large degree is why Islam plays such a prominent role in Tajik politics today. Alienated from the official muftiate, Tajiks turned more to local Islamic elites. Perhaps most prominent among these religious leaders was *qozi kalon* Akbar Turajonzoda, who, in 1988 and at the age of 34, ascended to the post of supreme judge of the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR).<sup>7</sup>

Turajonzoda was unusual in that, in addition to his Islamic training in the closely monitored Imam al-Bukhari institute in Tashkent—from which he graduated in 1980—he studied Islamic law in Jordan from 1982 to 1987.<sup>8</sup> Deeply influenced by the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood during this period abroad, Turajonzoda understood the role Islam could play in shaping politics.<sup>9</sup> In December 1991 Turajonzoda encouraged members of the Tajik Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) to break with their Uzbek counterparts and leave the Soviet-wide Islamic Renaissance Party, a revivalist party formed in June 1990.<sup>10</sup> Turajonzoda's support for an independent Tajik IRP opened the first and, as of today, the only space in which an Islamic party could participate in and directly influence the politics of a Central Asian country—a reality which explains why Central Asia's most prominent militant group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan—got its start in Tajikistan, not in Uzbekistan.

## **Islamism, Regionalism and the Tajik Civil War**

Tajikistan's December 1991 presidential elections were what motivated the split between the Tajik IRP members and their Uzbek counterparts who remained in the all-Union IRP. The all-Union IRP backed the former first secretary of the Tajik communist party, Rahmon Nabiev, whereas the Tajik IRP supported the nationalist Dawlat Khodanazarov.<sup>11</sup> Nabiev won the December ballot but he quickly became the target of mass demonstrations and widespread allegations of voter fraud. By September 1992 Nabiev had been ousted in a coup led by his former supporters and Tajikistan had devolved into civil war.

The Tajik civil war pitted the former Communist elite, an elite based in Tajikistan's Leninabidi and Kulyabi regions, against a coalition of nationalists, democrats and Islamists from Gorno-Badakhshan and Gharm, regions historically disenfranchised from Tajik power sharing arrangements. Qozi Turajonzoda, though his opposition to Nabiev and support for the Pamiri (Gorno-Badakhshan) nationalist Khodanazarov was critical

<sup>5</sup> Dudoignon, p. 58.

<sup>6</sup> Dudoignon, p. 71.

<sup>7</sup> Tim Epkenhans, 'Defining Normative Islam: Some Remarks on Contemporary Islamic Thought in Tajikistan – Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda's Sharia and Society', *Central Asian Survey*, 30 (2011), 81–96 (p. 85) <doi:10.1080/02634937.2011.554056>.

<sup>8</sup> Epkenhans, p. 85.

<sup>9</sup> Olivier Roy, 'Qibla and the Government House: The Islamist Networks', *SAIS Review*, 21 (2001), 53–63 (p. 56) <doi:10.1353/sais.2001.0047>.

<sup>10</sup> O. Roy, 'The Foreign Policy of the Central Asian Islamic Renaissance Party', *Council on Foreign Relations*, New York, 2000, p. 1 <http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/Roy.pdf> [accessed 21 January 2013].

<sup>11</sup> O. Roy, p. 9.

to the IRP's gaining a footing in Tajik politics in 1991, was himself removed from Tajikistan's regional rivalries. In addition to his having lived outside the country for half a decade in the 1980s, Turajonzoda's lineage also made him an outsider. His ancestors were Samarqandi Tajiks from neighboring Uzbekistan and, as such, Turajonzoda, though born in Tajikistan, nevertheless did not have the regional credentials to serve as the Islamist opposition's standard-bearer in the Tajik civil war.<sup>12</sup> This position he yielded to Sayyid Abdullo Nuri, a charismatic Gharmi imam whom the Soviets had jailed from 1986 to 1988 for publicly advocating for the creation of an Islamic state.<sup>13</sup>

Nuri's ability to blend Islamism, regionalism and nationalism into a paramilitary opposition proved sufficiently potent to compel Tajikistan's Moscow-backed former communists to agree to a United Nations-brokered power sharing arrangement in 1997. According to the terms of the UN agreement, Nuri's United Tajik Opposition (UTO), the umbrella group that included the IRP, as well as opposition nationalists and democrats, was to receive thirty percent of all executive branch seats in return for disarming.<sup>14</sup> Nuri's IRP, moreover, was accredited legal status, making it the first and only Islamic party in the former Soviet Union to be able to contest elections. Nuri's strength, critically however, has also proven to be part of the IRPs more recent downfall. Nuri died in 2006 and since his death the IRP has struggled to move beyond its regionalist roots and attract a large following at the national level.

## II. POST-CIVIL WAR TRENDS IN VIE AND THE TAJIK GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

Tajikistan is unusual in the post-Soviet space in two critical respects. First, thanks in large part to qazi Turajonzoda's parting ways first with the Soviet spiritual board and later, with the Tajik state in the early 1990s, the influence of the muftiate as a lever of state power is limited. The inability of the state to control Islam through the muftiate has encouraged a degree of Islamic pluralism in Tajikistan that is absent elsewhere in Central Asia.

Second, due in large part to Sayyid Abdullo Nuri's leadership of the IRP and the UTO during the civil war and his central role in the 1997 Tajik peace accords, Tajikistan became home to a legal Islamic political party, a development rare not only for the former Soviet Union, but also, at least until the recent Arab uprisings, rare for countries across much of the Muslim world. Critically however, Tajikistan's comparatively open religious environment has not precluded isolated acts of violent Islamist extremism (VIE) and, no less important, the Tajik government's levying charges of violent Islamist extremism against locally-based paramilitary organizations.

### Islamic Renaissance Party

That we see any violent Islamist extremism in Tajikistan is likely due to the fact that those who would like to see Islam play a more prominent role in politics have been disappointed with the IRP in the years since the 1997 peace accords. The IRP, in order to secure its position as a legal political party, was compelled to accept the secular nature of Tajik politics. The party's 1999 charter expressly stipulates that, were the IRP to win power, the party would not seek to replace the secular state with an Islamist government.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Vitalii Viacheslavovich Naumkin, *Radical Islam In Central Asia: Between Pen And Rifle* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), p. 215.

<sup>13</sup> Adeeb Khalid, *Islam After Communism: Religion And Politics in Central Asia* (University of California Press, 2007), p. 146.

<sup>14</sup> 'General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord in Tajikistan' (United Nations General Assembly, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Hakim Zainiddinov, 'The Changing Relationship of the Secularized State to Religion in Tajikistan', *Journal of Church and State*, 2012, p. 8 <doi:10.1093/jcs/css051>.

It is unlikely, however, that this hypothetical is one the IRP need ever address. The party has polled poorly in the three parliamentary elections held since the 1997 peace accords. In 2000 the party won 7.3 percent of the popular vote, netting the IRP only two of the parliament's sixty-three seats.<sup>16</sup> In the 2005 elections the IRP won 8.9 percent of the popular vote. This modest gain, however, did not yield any more seats in the parliament.<sup>17</sup> In the most recent parliamentary election in 2010, the IRP's polling numbers dropped to 7.7 percent though their total number of seats in the 63 member parliament remained at two.<sup>18</sup>

The IRP's leader, Muhiddin Kabiri, disputed the 2010 election results and argued that the IRP's share of the popular vote was closer to 30 percent.<sup>19</sup> Kabiri's complaint has merit. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) election monitoring division, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, has assessed all Tajik parliamentary elections since the end of the civil war as having fallen "short of OSCE election-related commitments, namely in the important areas of transparency, accountability, fairness, and secrecy."<sup>20</sup>

That said, even Kabiri himself has acknowledged that the IRP's resonance in Tajik politics is limited beyond being a weak "catchall for voters unsatisfied with the government."<sup>21</sup> The IRP, in short, is in a difficult bind. Given the Rahmon government's frequent warnings about militant Islamism, the party must embrace secularism to survive, a reality that makes Islamists dissatisfied. At the same time, secular voters continue to distrust the IRP due the enduring memory of the party's civil war militant Islamist leanings.<sup>22</sup> This enervation of the IRP is likely a welcome post-civil war development for the Rahmon government. Critically however, growing societal dissatisfaction with the IRP opens political space for other, more militant groups. Most notable among these groups is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an organization—as its name suggests—whose presence in Tajikistan is as much a legacy of external politics as it is of the IRP's current inability to connect with Tajik society.

## **Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan**

On December 1, 1989, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev declared during a visit to the Vatican that all people "have a right to satisfy their spiritual needs."<sup>23</sup> Not all Central Asian leaders have shared Gorbachev's inclination. Nowhere has this been more the case than in Tajikistan's neighbor, Uzbekistan.

The Uzbek government perceives Islam as a threat to patronage politics. Uzbek president Islam Karimov, like many Central Asian leaders, provides economic incentives to regional and local level appointees—that is,

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<sup>16</sup> Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *The Republic of Tajikistan Elections to the Parliament, 27 February 2000: Final Report* (Warsaw, 2000), p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 'Republic of Tajikistan Parliamentary Elections, 27 February and 13 March 2005: Final Report', 2005, p. 21  
<<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/tajikistan/15193>> [accessed 25 January 2013].

<sup>18</sup> Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 'Republic of Tajikistan Parliamentary Elections, 28 February 2010: Final Report', 2010, p. 33 <<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/69061>> [accessed 25 January 2013].

<sup>19</sup> Zainiddinov, p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *The Republic of Tajikistan elections to the Parliament, 27 February 2000*, p. 1; Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 'Republic of Tajikistan Parliamentary Elections, 27 February and 13 March 2005: Final Report', p. 21; Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 'Republic of Tajikistan Parliamentary Elections, 28 February 2010: Final Report', p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Dilafruz Khonikboyeva, 'IRP Leader Speaks in Washington, Unsure of Party Goals and Wary of Tajikistan's Future', *Asia-Plus*, 19 October 2012 <<http://scar.gmu.edu/icar-news/irp-leader-speaks-washington-unsure-of-party-goals-and-wary-of-tajikistan%E2%80%99s-future>> [accessed 26 January 2013].

<sup>22</sup> Zainiddinov, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Clyde Haberman, 'The Kremlin and the Vatican; Gorbachev Visits Pope at Vatican; Ties Are Forged', *The New York Times*, 2 December 1989, section 1, p. 1.

patronage—and these appointees, in turn, fulfill the directives of the central government. Islam presents a challenge to patronage politics on two levels. First, Islam's ethics stand in stark contrast to state-sponsored corruption. Second, religious faith builds community trust which, in turn, facilitates independent economic partnerships. When these partnerships succeed, the autocratic state's economic comparative advantage weakens. This can cause regional and local bureaucrats to break from top-down patronage systems and shift their allegiance to local economic and religious elites. The IMU emerged as a result of this tension between patronage politics and religion.

Prior to forming the IMU, the organization's leaders, Tohir Yoldosh and Juma Namangani (Juma Khojiyev), were activists with *Adolat* (Justice), a prominent Islamic group based in Namangan, an Uzbek city 33 miles from the Tajik border. Yoldosh and Namangani organized a series of rallies in November 1991 with the goal of winning the Karimov government's approval for the opening of an Islamic educational center in Namangan. Karimov, surprised by the mass support for the Islamic center, agreed to *Adolat*'s request. The Uzbek president, however, soon changed his mind and closed the center in March 1992, unceremoniously dumping the center's property onto Namangan's city streets. The Namangan Islamic Center's March 1992 ransacking marked the beginning of the steady repression of independent Islamic leaders in Uzbekistan and the radicalization of Yoldosh and Namangani.

In the crosshairs of the Uzbek government and seeking to advance their mission of spreading Islamic justice in Central Asia, Yoldosh and Namangani crossed the border and joined the IRP. During the civil war Namangani became one of the opposition's more prominent field commanders.<sup>24</sup> Following the war's 1997 conclusion, Yoldosh and Namangani remained in Tajikistan and, using their proximity to their native Uzbekistan, turned their attention once again to the Karimov government. In 1998 Yoldosh and Namangani formed the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).<sup>25</sup> From its bases in Tajikistan, the IMU initiated armed incursions into neighboring Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000. The IMU and its affiliates are also believed to be responsible for deadly bombings in Tashkent in 1999 and 2004.

The Karimov regime struck back against IMU bases in Tajikistan in spring 2000. The Tajik Minister of Emergencies, Mirzo Ziyeyev, who had fought alongside Yoldosh and Namangani during the civil war and was sympathetic to the IMU leaders' struggle against the Karimov government, engineered an evacuation of IMU militants from Tajikistan and into neighboring Afghanistan. The evacuation included a convoy of "thirteen buses, twelve KamAZ trucks, and twenty-five foreign-made passenger cars."<sup>26</sup>

The IMU has had multiple setbacks since its evacuation from Tajikistan. In November 2001, Namangani was killed in a US airstrike in the northern Kunduz province of Afghanistan.<sup>27</sup> Yoldosh died in August 2009 in what is thought to have been a US predator drone strike on an IMU base along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.<sup>28</sup> Usmon Odil, Yoldosh's son-in-law, served as the IMU's leader until reportedly being killed in Waziristan in the summer of 2012.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the departure of IMU leaders to Afghanistan and Pakistan and the setbacks the IMU leadership has encountered, the organization nevertheless has maintained operatives as well as a capacity to stage militant operations within Tajikistan. Tajikistan remains an attractive staging point for the IMU due its proximity to Uzbekistan and to the fact that the Rahmon government often struggles to project substantial power in the

<sup>24</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (Penguin, 2002), pp. 142–143.

<sup>25</sup> Johan Engvall, 'The State Under Siege: The Drug Trade and Organised Crime in Tajikistan', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 58 (2006), 827–854 (p. 838) <doi:10.1080/09668130600830904>.

<sup>26</sup> Galina Gridneva and Valery Zhukov, 'Armed Uzbek Islamists Escorted Towards Afghan Border', *TASS*, 4 May 2000.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce Pannier, 'IMU Announces Longtime Leader Dead, Names Successor', *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, 17 August 2010, section Features <[http://www.rferl.org/content/IMU\\_Announces\\_Longtime\\_Leader\\_Dead\\_Names\\_Successor/2130382.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/IMU_Announces_Longtime_Leader_Dead_Names_Successor/2130382.html)> [accessed 27 January 2013].

<sup>28</sup> Pannier.

<sup>29</sup> 'Uzbek Islamist Group Reportedly Deploying Troops on Afghan-Tajik Border', *Tojnews Online* (Dushanbe, 16 August 2012).

regions. That said, the Rahmon government has had occasional successes in its struggle with the IMU. In 2002 the Tajik government transferred twelve alleged IMU militants to Uzbek custody.<sup>30</sup> In 2007 the Tajik courts found three IMU members guilty of plotting bomb attacks.<sup>31</sup> In 2009 the police killed four IMU militants during a gun battle in Isfara, a northern Tajik city five miles from the Uzbek border.<sup>32</sup> And in 2011, Tajik courts sentenced forty-three IMU members for their alleged role in the deadly 2010 suicide bombing of a police station in Khujand.<sup>33</sup> Most recently the IMU's new leader, Usmon Ghani, is believed to have moved IMU fighters to the Afghan-Tajik border in August 2012, allegedly in preparation for supporting anti-Rahmon militants based in Khorog, Tajikistan.<sup>34</sup>

It should be stressed that establishing a clear understanding of the IMU today, along with its involvement in Tajik politics, is difficult. That is, while multiple reporting sources allow confidence in concluding that Tajikistan has suffered several violent extremist attacks over the past decade, we have only the Tajik government's assessment that the perpetrators of these attacks can be linked to the IMU. Indeed, as the following discussion of the 2010 Rasht Valley and 2012 Khorog armed conflicts suggests, the motivations behind militancy and anti-state violence are complex; while many of the militants in Tajikistan today were co-travellers—if not members—of the Islamic militant opposition that fought against the Rahmon government during the civil war, discourses of Islamic justice and Islamist extremism now, as equally they may have been then, can serve as convenient framings for all sides engaged in Tajikistan's simmering state-society relations.

## Rasht Valley 2010

On September 19, 2010, militants in the Rasht valley in eastern Tajikistan killed 26 government soldiers. The soldiers had entered the valley in pursuit of two dozen inmates who had escaped a maximum-security prison in the capital, Dushanbe, the preceding month. Most of the escaped inmates had just received sentences for their alleged role in a scheme to topple the Rahmon government and for their membership in the IMU.<sup>35</sup>

The leader of the Rasht valley militants was Alovuddin Davlatov, a local warlord who served as a commander for the United Tajik Opposition during the civil war. Davlatov, according to a confession from his brother, Husniddin Davlatov—who was detained by the government earlier in the month on suspicion of links to Islamist extremist groups—ran a “terrorist training camp” with the aid of “foreign mercenaries.”<sup>36</sup> Rahmon government representatives have argued, however, that Davlatov was only one of several Islamist militants that participated in the attack and that remain active in the mountains of Rasht. Also involved, the Defense Ministry spokesman Faridun Makhmadaliyev noted, was Abdullo Rakhimov – also known as Mullo Abdullo – an IMU militant who fought with the IRP during the civil war and later with the Taliban against coalition forces in Afghanistan.<sup>37</sup>

Others, however, question the Rahmon government's narrative of the Rasht events. John Heathershaw and Sophie Roche, two European scholars who have conducted extensive fieldwork in the Rasht valley and who have spoken with eyewitnesses to the conflict, suggest that militant Islam was not the driver of the September 2010 events. Rather, Heathershaw and Roche find the conflict was sparked by the Rahmon government's violation of a longstanding unwritten agreement in which local warlords like Davlatov, not state appointees,

<sup>30</sup> ‘Tajikistan Hands Over 12 Terror Suspects to Uzbekistan’, *Agence France Presse*, 3 November 2002.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Three Tajiks Sentenced for Preparing Attacks’, *Agence France Presse*, 26 December 2007.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Tajikistan Kills Four Members of Taliban-Linked Group’, *Agence France Presse*, 19 October 2009.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Scores Convicted Over Deadly Tajik Car Bombing’, *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, 26 December 2011, section Tajikistan <[http://www.rferl.org/content/convictions\\_deadly\\_tajikistan\\_car\\_bombing/24433933.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/convictions_deadly_tajikistan_car_bombing/24433933.html)> [accessed 31 January 2013].

<sup>34</sup> ‘Uzbek Islamist Group Reportedly Deploying Troops on Afghan-Tajik Border’.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Tajikistan: Militant Ambush Puts Spotlight on Security Situation’, *EurasiaNet*, 20 September 2010 <<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/61971>> [accessed 1 February 2013].

<sup>36</sup> Nargis Hamroboeva, ‘Alovuddin Davlatov Behind the Attack on Military Convoy in Rasht’, *Asia Plus*, 21 September 2010 <<http://news.tj/en/news/alovuddin-davlatov-behind-attack-military-convoy-rasht>> [accessed 1 February 2013].

<sup>37</sup> ‘Tajikistan’.

exercised political authority in Rasht.<sup>38</sup> The Dushanbe inmates fled to Rasht seeking refuge with these local warlords and the central government's pursuit of the inmates into warlord controlled territory, not calls to militant Islam, prompted the clash.<sup>39</sup>

## Khorog 2012

Two competing interpretations similarly emerged following the violence in Khorog in 2012. On July 21, 2012, General Abdullo Nazarov was killed in the city of Khorog, in the Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous district located in eastern Tajikistan. Nazarov was the Rahmon government's National Security Committee commander in Gorno-Badakhshan. Nazarov's alleged killer is Tolib Ayombekov, a Badakhshan militant who fought with the United Tajik Opposition during the civil war. Curiously, Ayombekov was also General Nazarov's second in command, one of several government positions Ayombekov had held as part of the opposition-government power sharing arrangement stipulated by the 1997 peace accords.<sup>40</sup>

In an effort to capture Ayombekov and his alleged co-conspirators, the central government dispersed three thousand troops to Khorog. As was the case in the Rasht valley conflict, so too here local militants engaged the Tajik government troops. Seventeen government soldiers and thirty militants died in the fighting.<sup>41</sup> Ayombekov negotiated a truce with the central government in August and was placed under house arrest. Two months later Ayombekov was travelling Khorog freely in his white Mercedes sedan, accompanied by a dozen bodyguards.<sup>42</sup>

The Tajik National Security Committee was quick to suggest a link between the Khorog violence and international Islamist militants, noting that it was investigating the Khorog militants' connections with the Taliban and the IMU.<sup>43</sup> During a September visit to the city, President Rahmon reemphasized this link to foreign militants, pledging the Tajik government "will wage unrelenting war on terror, extremism, and the illegal turnover of drugs and arms."<sup>44</sup> Khorog's militants, Rahmon explained, "were pursuing far-reaching goals ... they were offered tens of millions of dollars from abroad."<sup>45</sup>

In contrast to the terror and extremism lines the Tajik government has offered, others have suggested that Khorog, like Rasht, was a local warlord's response to the Rahmon government's attempt to extend centralized authority into regions where such authority has not existed. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty journalist Farhod Milod has written that Ayombekov controlled a lucrative gemstone, narcotics and tobacco trade. Khorog, fewer than two miles from the Afghan border, served as a port of entry for goods travelling north and west to Dushanbe and, from there, ultimately to Russia and Europe.<sup>46</sup> Ayombekov appears to have shared the wealth from this lucrative business. Khorog is remarkable for its proliferation of "four-wheel drives and McMansions."<sup>47</sup> And in 2008, when the Rahmon government last attempted to reign in Ayombekov and his fellow Khorog warlords, local residents packed the city center in protest of Dushanbe.

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<sup>38</sup> John Heathershaw and Sophie Roche, 'Islam and Political Violence in Tajikistan' <[http://www.academia.edu/1028383/Islam\\_and\\_Political\\_Violence\\_in\\_Tajikistan](http://www.academia.edu/1028383/Islam_and_Political_Violence_in_Tajikistan)> [accessed 21 January 2013].

<sup>39</sup> Heathershaw and Roche, p. 13.

<sup>40</sup> Farhod Milod, 'Who Is Tolib Ayombekov?', 2012 <<http://registan.net/2012/07/30/who-is-tolib-ayombekov/>> [accessed 1 February 2013].

<sup>41</sup> 'Tajik Rebel Chief Hands in Weapons As Truce Holds', *Agence France Presse*, 13 August 2012.

<sup>42</sup> 'Tajikistan: Accused Warlord Speaks Out on Gorno-Badakhshan Violence', *EurasiaNet*, 24 October 2012 <<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66101>> [accessed 1 February 2013].

<sup>43</sup> "Many Dead" in Tajikistan Clashes', *BBC*, 24 July 2012, section Asia <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-18965366>> [accessed 1 February 2013].

<sup>44</sup> 'Tajik Leader Rules Out Talks with Rebels After Clashes', *Agence France Presse*, 19 September 2012.

<sup>45</sup> 'Tajik Leader Rules Out Talks with Rebels After Clashes'.

<sup>46</sup> Milod.

<sup>47</sup> 'Violence in Tajikistan: The Strongman Cometh', *The Economist*, 2012 <<http://www.economist.com/node/21559664>> [accessed 1 February 2013].

Rahmon backed down and Ayombekov was awarded the directorship of Badakshan's border guards.<sup>48</sup> That peace quickly returned once the Rahmon government backed down would suggest that the Khorog events, much like the Rasht conflict, was more a struggle over territory than a struggle of Islamist militants seeking to establish a caliphate.

### III. CURRENT AND PROSPECTIVE DRIVERS OF VE/I IN TAJIKISTAN

#### Analysis of the Scope, Nature, Drivers, and Potential Manifestations of the VE/I Risk Today

As the preceding section demonstrates, while it is clear that violent extremism and insurgency exist in Tajikistan, it is unlikely that the violence and insurgency we see in Tajikistan can be categorized as Islamist in origin. Many of the potential drivers of VE/I identified in USAID's *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism* are present in Tajik state-society relations.<sup>49</sup> The following paragraphs provide a discussion of these drivers and, more specifically, how these drivers potentially might operate at the individual, intermediate group, and society-wide levels so as to increase the potential for violent Islamist extremism (VIE). It should be noted that these drivers have been present in Tajik state-society relations for more than two decades and have not, with the possible exception of the 1992-1997 civil war, produced clear cases of Islamist-inspired violence and extremism. That said, as noted in the conclusion of this section, scenarios do exist in which VIE might emerge and fundamentally alter the nature of state-society relations in Tajikistan.

##### Individual-Level Drivers of VE/I

USAID's *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism* encourages the analyst to consider the absence or presence of the following five categories when assessing the potential individuals may engage in violent extremism or insurgency: (1) "concrete and specific political, economic, and social grievances"; (2) "broader ideological (especially religious) objectives"; (3) "the search for economic gain, or the pull exercised by prior involvement in illicit economic activities"; (4) "personal factors... (such as) the desire to avenge a loved one, or follow a friend... on the path of jihad"; and (5) "intimidation or coercion by peers or the community."<sup>50</sup>

Of these five drivers, it is the first – political, economic, and social grievances – as well as the third – involvement in illicit economic activities – that have motivated individual Tajiks to challenge their government. Indeed, if one were to distill the cause of the 1992-1997 war to its most basic, it was Gorno-Badakhshani and Gharmi residents' frustration with the holdover Leninabidi and Kulyabi Soviet-era elite that led them to support oppositionist local militias. Similarly, if compelled to identify the one driver of the 2010 Rasht valley and the 2012 Khorog conflicts, it would be the Rahmon government's ill-advised attempt to dismantle licit and illicit local networks of patronage the Rasht valley and Khorog warlords managed by Davlatov and Ayombekov.

Broader ideological objectives—the IRP's and later the IMU's avowed Islamism—may have at times mapped on to individual economic and political grievances. That said, there are several factors that suggest that ideologies of violent Islamist extremism find little resonance among the wider Tajik population. These

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<sup>48</sup> Milod.

<sup>49</sup> Guilain Denoeux and Lynn Carter, 'Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism' (produced for USAID by Management Systems International, 2009) <[http://transition.usaid.gov/locations/sub-saharan\\_africa/publications/docs/guide\\_to\\_drivers\\_of\\_ve.pdf](http://transition.usaid.gov/locations/sub-saharan_africa/publications/docs/guide_to_drivers_of_ve.pdf)>.

<sup>50</sup> Denoeux and Carter, p. 63.

factors include the readiness with which the IRP transitioned to a post-civil war secular party platform; the ease with which, in 2000, the former IRP commander-turned-Minister of Emergencies, Mirzo Ziyeyev, shipped the IMU militants encamped in Tajikistan off to Afghanistan; and the IMU’s inability to establish a base of operations in Tajikistan in the decade since. Neither, moreover, do personal factors such as vengeance or coercion by peers appear to be drivers of Tajikistan’s episodic violence, a violence that, viewed from the government perspective, is more self-inflicted than grass-roots inspired.

## **Group-Level Drivers of VE/I**

Although individual-level drivers of VE/I in Tajikistan are currently lacking, people are malleable and, given the right environment, Tajiks, like any population, can suddenly be mobilized in unexpected ways. The *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism* highlights political anthropologist and counter-terrorism expert David Kilcullen’s observation, “people don’t get pushed into rebellion by their ideology. They get pulled in by their social networks.”<sup>51</sup> Sheri Berman, in her study of Weimar Germany’s high degree of associationalism and the rise of Nazism, similarly concludes that dense social networks can generate unexpected and, from the Western perspective, undesirable outcomes: “civil society may not necessarily promote liberal democracy, as the neo-Tocquevilleans would have it, but rather may simply corrode the foundations of the current political order while providing an organizational base from which it can be challenged.”<sup>52</sup>

Such deep interpersonal ties exist throughout Tajikistan. As this study’s analysis illustrates, regions like Gorno-Badakhshan and Gharm are marked by social networks cemented by the enduring memory of civil war and by strong regional identities characteristic of communities actively seeking to remove themselves from disliked central government rule.<sup>53</sup> Such associationalism is not determinative of violent extremism any more than it is of democracy or extreme nationalism. This associationalism is, however, permissive of extremism. In short, given the dense interpersonal networks that exist at the regional level throughout much of Tajikistan, one can imagine a future in which a charismatic leader capable of articulating a coherent and compelling message is able to mobilize followers to engage in acts of VE/I just as one can equally imagine a charismatic leader mobilizing followers in support of democratic reform.<sup>54</sup> Berman’s analysis is particularly relevant here. Germans were drawn to Hitler in large part due to their growing disillusionment with the economic failures of the democratic Weimar Republic. Were Tajiks to come to believe the Rahmon government—perhaps due to its relationship with Western powers—was emblematic of democracy, it is conceivable that Islamist appeals might resonate more readily than do effete promises of democracy.

## **Political- and Societal-Level Drivers of VIE**

In addition to individual- and group-level drivers of violent Islamist extremism, USAID’s *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism* also highlights seven “political drivers” that have the potential to shape and reshape society broadly. These drivers include: (1) denial of political rights and civil liberties; (2) violations of human rights; (3) widespread government corruption; (4) the presence of ungoverned territories; (5) a history of prior militant conflict; (6) external state support for domestic violent extremist groups; and (7) illegitimate yet unchallenged national governments.<sup>55</sup> All seven of these political and societal-level drivers either are currently present or once were present in Tajikistan, a reality that further suggests the current state-society environment in Tajikistan is permissive, though by no means determinative, of VIE.

<sup>51</sup> Denoeux and Carter, p. 74.

<sup>52</sup> Sheri Berman, ‘Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic’, *World Politics*, 49 (1997), p. 428.

<sup>53</sup> For more on how a disliked central government animates the formation of strong separationist regional identities, see: James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>54</sup> Though difficult to falsify and, as such, given scant attention in the social science literature, agency-centered causalities of change should not be dismissed. For a forceful argument in defense of elite agency causalities of post Soviet change, see: Michael McFaul, ‘The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship: Noncooperative Transitions in the Postcommunist World’, *World Politics*, 54 (2002), 212–244.

<sup>55</sup> Denoeux and Carter, p. 27.

Tajikistan consistently scores poorly in international organizations' assessments of civil and political rights. Freedom House has, for the past decade, labeled Tajikistan as "not free" in its composite civil and political rights measure of regime type. As noted above, the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, has concluded all Tajik parliamentary elections have been marred by significant irregularities. Tajikistan has scored equally poorly in international assessments of human rights. The US State Department's 2011 Tajikistan Country Report on Human Rights Practices, for example, faults the Rahmon government for "torture and abuse of detainees and other persons by security forces, restrictions on freedoms of expression and religion (especially regarding the prosecution of journalists and repression of faith groups), and violence and discrimination against women."<sup>56</sup>

Violations of religious human rights have been particularly pronounced in Tajikistan. The Rahmon government has outright banned several Islamic groups from organizing in Tajikistan. Membership in the political Islamist group, Hizb-ut Tahrir, was made illegal in 2000. The proselytizing activities of the Islamic group, Tablighi Jamaat, were made illegal in 2006.<sup>57</sup> Salafism, as expansively understood by the Tajik government, was made illegal in 2009.<sup>58</sup> And the "Law on Parental Responsibility," passed in August 2011, makes it illegal for Tajiks under the age of 18 to attend mosque and, more broadly, "public religious activities with the exception of funerals."<sup>59</sup> Islamic education is strictly controlled by the state, unregistered Islamic schools are routinely closed, and registered Islamic schools are closely monitored. Finally, in November 2010, the Tajik government went so far as to recall Tajiks studying Islam abroad in institutions like Egypt's Al-Azhar University.<sup>60</sup>

Corruption in Tajikistan, as it is elsewhere in Central Asia, is pervasive. Tajikistan ranks 157<sup>th</sup> out of 174 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.<sup>61</sup> Sixty percent of all Tajikistan businesses surveyed in the World Bank's 2008 reported that government corruption was an obstacle to conducting business.<sup>62</sup> It is not only domestic businesses that have expressed frustration with the government's corruption. Former US Ambassador to Tajikistan, Richard Hoagland, remarked in a 2005 cable to Washington: "The greatest obstacle to improving the economy is resistance to reform. From the President down to the policeman on the street, government is characterized by cronyism and corruption."<sup>63</sup>

As for the final political and societal-level potential drivers of violent Islamist extremism—the presence of ungoverned territories, a history of prior militant conflict, external state support for domestic violent extremist groups, and an illegitimate yet unchallenged national governments—all of these are present with the exception of external *state* support for domestic violent extremists. During the 1990s the IRP did receive limited support from Iran and, toward the end of the Tajik civil war, Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.<sup>64</sup> External state support for Tajik Islamist militancy, however, dried up as one-time Tajik militants—some of them nominally Islamist militants during the civil war—returned to more familiar patterns of localized warlordism in the 2000s. As this continued warlordism suggests, the Rahmon government's authority often

<sup>56</sup> 'Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2011--Tajikistan', 2011  
<<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm>> [accessed 2 February 2013].

<sup>57</sup> Zainiddinov, p. 14.

<sup>58</sup> Zainiddinov, p. 14.

<sup>59</sup> *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011--Tajikistan*.

<sup>60</sup> Edward Lemon, 'Tajikistan: Dushanbe Forcing Students Abroad to Return Home', *EurasiaNet*, 29 November 2010  
<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62460>.

<sup>61</sup> '2012 Corruption Perceptions Index -- Results' <<http://www.transparency.org/cpi2012/results#myAnchor1>> [accessed 2 February 2013].

<sup>62</sup> BEEPS At-A-Glance 2008: *Tajikistan* (World Bank, January 2010), p. 20  
<<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/ECAEXT/0,,contentMDK:22610999~pagePK:146736~piPK:146830~theSitePK:258599,00.html>> [accessed 2 February 2013].

<sup>63</sup> George Camm, 'Tajikistan Led by "Cronyism and Corruption" -- WikiLeaks', *EurasiaNet*, 13 December 2010  
<<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62564>>.

<sup>64</sup> O. Roy, pp. 19–20.

ends where the Dushanbe city limits begin. Curiously, the national government, often seen as weak and illegitimate, faces no substantial domestic opposition. Perhaps due to its limited reach outside the capital, the Rahmon regime is, for many Tajiks, both illegitimate and irrelevant.

## Scenarios for the Emergence of VIE in Tajikistan

While Tajikistan may exhibit several potential drivers of VE/I, it is missing one critical driver: a population inclined to militancy. Disaffected young men overwhelmingly constitute the foot soldiers of Islamist militancy just as they do other forms of state-directed militancy. There is no shortage of disaffected young Tajik men. Most of these young men, however, are not in Tajikistan, but rather are economic migrants in Russia.

In 2007 the Russian government registered 727,000 Tajik labor migrants.<sup>65</sup> The International Organization for Migration estimates that due to the fact that many labor migrants are unregistered, the number of Tajik workers in Russia is considerably higher – perhaps as many as 1.5 million.<sup>66</sup> Tajikistan's total population in 2012 was 7.7 million. Males between the age of 20 and 34 constituted 1.1 million of this population.<sup>67</sup> The extent to which this demographic coincides with the Tajik labor migrant demographic is unclear. Many demographic studies suggest, though, that a large percentage of Tajikistan's young men spend months, if not years, working abroad, mostly in Russia.<sup>68</sup>

Were opportunities to work in Russia disappear, one could imagine a scenario in which young Tajik men, idle and unemployed in their home cities and towns, become easy recruits for comparatively well-heeled militant Islamist entrepreneurs. How committed Tajikistan's young men would be to the cause of militant Islamism is difficult to know. The scholar of rebellion, Jeremy Weinstein, has demonstrated, for example, that combatants motivated by economic need rather than ideological commitments quickly lose interest in insurgency.<sup>69</sup> Weinstein finds that if militant leaders have little access to external economic resources and, as such, have few economic incentives to offer recruits, insurgencies must be built using “established norms and networks.”<sup>70</sup> He also finds that insurgencies poorly endowed economically tend to prove more enduring and effective.<sup>71</sup>

Both well- and the poorly-endowed insurgencies have the potential to emerge in Tajikistan. A poorly-endowed insurgency, in that it would need to draw on local norms and practices, likely would not be overtly Islamist in orientation, and rather would likely resemble the nominally Islamist IRP of the civil war period. On the other hand, an externally funded and well-endowed insurgency, for example a Tajik insurgency funded by a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan, might well have a more pronounced militant Islamist orientation. The commitment of young Tajik men to such an insurgency, however, would likely be fleeting. In any event, though, the likelihood of either insurgency emerging is low. Russia's demographics are such that the country's need for migrant labor will continue for the foreseeable future and hundreds of thousands of young Tajik men will continue to travel north to meet this need.

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<sup>65</sup> Khojamuhammad Umarov, *Tajik Labour Migration During the Global Economic Crisis: Causes and Consequences - July 2010* (Dushanbe, Tajikistan: International Organization for Migration, July 2010), p. 11 <<http://www.iom.tj/pubs/globalcrisis.pdf>>.

<sup>66</sup> Umarov, p. 11.

<sup>67</sup> US Census Bureau Data, 2012: <http://www.census.gov>.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example: C. Buckley and E. T. Hofmann, ‘Are Remittances an Effective Mechanism for Development? Evidence from Tajikistan, 1999–2007’, *Journal of Development Studies*, 48 (2012), 1121–1138; Umarov; Mary Elaine Hegland, ‘Tajik Male Labour Migration and Women Left Behind: Can They Resist Gender and Generational Hierarchies?’, *Anthropology of the Middle East*, 5 (2010), 16–35 <doi:10.3167/ame.2010.050203>.

<sup>69</sup> Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 10.

<sup>70</sup> Weinstein, p. 10.

<sup>71</sup> Weinstein, p. 10.

## IV. POTENTIAL USG RESPONSES

The preceding analysis has identified potential drivers of VE/I in Tajikistan at three levels. At the individual level, Tajiks might be likely in the future to consider VE/I due to enduring political, economic, and social grievances and due to a desire to benefit from illicit economic activities. At the group level, Tajiks might be inclined to consider VE/I if a charismatic and militant leader were to effectively capitalize on the many dense associational networks that define everyday life in the regions. And at the macro, state-society level, key political drivers—violations of political, civil and human rights, government corruption, the presence of ungoverned territories, Tajikistan’s history of prior militant conflict, and the presence of an illegitimate yet unchallenged national government—create an environment permissive of violent extremism and already generative of insurgency.

Despite the presence of these drivers, this study suggests that the likelihood of violent Islamist extremism in Tajikistan over the short to medium term is low. The potential for insurgency, however, as the Tajikistan’s civil war experience as well as the more recent Rasht Valley and Khorog conflicts demonstrate, remains high. The United States Government (USG) would do well to keep the varying likelihoods for VE/I in mind as it tailors its policies and development programs for this struggling Central Asian country.

USAID currently focuses its development activities in Tajikistan in four areas: Economic Development, Investing in People, Governing Justly and Democratically, and Humanitarian Assistance. These USAID projects appear, for the most part, well designed and cognizant of the fact that the current Rahmon government has little interest in political reform. USG priorities thus appropriately center on local governance initiatives, civil society development, enhancing the objectivity and availability of Tajik media, agricultural reform, healthcare, and education. These projects will assist in institution building at the regional level and thus will help ensure greater governance capacity when, at a future date, a more reformist minded national government emerges in Dushanbe.

### Promoting Political Parties

Absent from USG programming in Tajikistan are political party building efforts similar to the work the USG supports elsewhere in Central Asia. The greatest challenge to Tajik political reform—and as such, the greatest potential driver of VE/I in Tajikistan—is the absence of a legitimate opposition to the widely disliked Rahmon government. This problem is compounded by the fact that, to the extent that any degree of political contestation exists in Tajikistan, this contestation is rooted in the regional and local levels and is altogether absent at the national level. Taken together, this absence of a national-level opposition and Tajikistan’s pronounced regionalism is a recipe not only for insurgency, but also for state fragmentation.

Neither continued illegitimate rule nor regionally-based insurgency is an attractive future for Tajikistan. USG programs that assist Tajiks in developing national-level parties that are both legitimate and regionally inclusive would go some way in helping Tajikistan, in its third decade of independence, escape the illegitimate regimes and insurgent regions that defined its first two decades of post-Soviet existence.

### Advancing Decentralized Governance

A contributing cause to the 2012 Khorog violence was the widely held perception among local residents that the Dushanbe government was illegitimately intervening in Gorno-Badakhshan’s (GBAO) local governance. A frequently voiced complaint in Khorog is that Dushanbe appoints outsiders to key positions in the GBAO administration and that these outsiders demand payments from lower placed local officials.<sup>72</sup> Khorog

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<sup>72</sup> Author interviews, Khorog, Gorno-Badakhshan, May 7-15, 2013.

residents perceive this practice as Dushanbe's attempt to establish a power vertical. The Rahmon government, cognizant that its authority rapidly diminishes outside of Dushanbe, has attempted to develop this power vertical—with varying degrees of success—in other regions of the country.<sup>73</sup> Understandably, GBAO residents and Tajik citizens more generally resent this practice and would prefer to manage local affairs free from the tensions and the inefficiencies that centralized patronage politics engender.

The USG would do well to continue and potentially expand its emphasis on local governance programming in Tajikistan. While certain responsibilities—most notably border defense—should remain under the authority of the central government, other competencies such as policing, tax collection, business licensing and the regulation of local trade can productively be devolved to local and regional governments. USG development responses that facilitate this process of devolution as well as the clear demarcation of central and local government authorities can help ease what are now often tense relations between Dushanbe and the regions.

## **Ensuring Freedom of Religion**

Tajikistan is the only country in Central Asia in which an independent religious political party can participate in elections. While the Rahmon government deserves considerable praise for not barring the IRP from contesting elections, restrictions placed on the IRP's freedom of assembly as well as frequent intimidation of IRP members limits the party's ability to effectively participate in Tajik politics. Restrictive laws on religion, moreover, further erode Tajik citizens' ability to pursue and freely express their religious interests.

The USG as well as U.S. NGOs can partner with the Rahmon government and Tajik civil society to improve mutual understanding and to work toward greater religious freedom. The Dushanbe government understandably is concerned about the potential spillover of Islamist extremism from Afghanistan into Tajikistan. This concern, however, is misplaced. The majority of Tajikistan's young men, the likely foot soldiers of militant Islamism were it to emerge, are working abroad and are more oriented toward sending remittances to their families than they are toward advancing militant Islamism at home. Critically though, excessive restrictions on religious freedoms can, over time, engender resentment toward the government and, as the Rasht Valley and Khorog violence illustrates, this resentment can spark fleeting, albeit deadly conflicts between the central state and Tajik society. Assistance that advances trust between religious groups and the Tajik state while simultaneously reducing restrictions on religious freedoms can help limit the potential for similar violent conflict in the future.

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<sup>73</sup> For a cogent discussion of the Rahmon government's mixed attempts at reestablishing a power vertical in Tajikistan's regions see: Lawrence P. Markowitz, *State Erosion: Unlootable Resources and Unruly Elites in Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, forthcoming, 2013).

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