



Tajikistan: Recent Developments and U.S. Interests

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Summary

This report outlines the severe challenges faced by Tajikistan since its five-year civil war ended in 1997, including such problems as deep poverty and poor governance. The report discusses U.S. policy and assistance. Basic facts and biographical information are provided. This report may be updated. Related products include CRS Report RL33458, *Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests*, updated regularly.

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U.S. Relations

According to the Obama Administration, Tajikistan is “on the frontline of our ongoing military stabilization efforts in Afghanistan, [is] a strong supporter in the war on terror ... and plays a key role in counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism.” U.S. support for border security, counter-narcotics, democratization, healthcare, education, and economic growth is “key to improving Tajikistan’s role as a bulwark against regional threats.”¹

State Department officials served as observers at the U.N.-sponsored intra-Tajikistan peace talks and pledged rebuilding aid, an example of U.S. diplomatic efforts to head off or ease ethnic and civil tensions in the Eurasian states. The United States also supported the presence of U.N. military observers in Tajikistan during the 1992-1997 civil war.

The United States has been the major humanitarian and developmental aid donor to facilitate implementation of the Tajik peace accord and for resettlement of displaced persons. Over the period FY1992-FY2008, the United States was the largest bilateral donor, budgeting \$778.6 million of aid for Tajikistan (FREEDOM Support Act and agency budgets), mainly for food and other humanitarian needs. The United States also facilitated the delivery of privately donated commodities. Estimated budgeted assistance for FY2009 was \$46.832 million, and the budget request for Tajikistan for foreign operations for FY2010 is \$52.349 million (FY2009 and FY2010 figures exclude Defense Department and other agency funding, except for FY2009 supplemental Defense Department funding for counter-narcotics efforts). The Administration urges “significant new [aid] resources” in 2010 to assist Tajikistan to address chronic winter electricity shortages and food shortages that “have threatened to destabilize Tajikistan.” The Administration also calls for boosting aid in 2010 for healthcare and education, since needs in these sectors “jeopardize progress” on other U.S. objectives, and requests ongoing humanitarian aid to address an average of 500 disasters per year in Tajikistan, which is in one of the world’s most active seismic zones.²

The State Department’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) warns that “Tajikistan has emerged as a frontline state in the war on drugs and is suffering from the boom in Afghan drug production. The Republic of Tajikistan is also a major center for domestic and international drug trafficking organizations.” The United States funds a counter-narcotics office in the U.S. Embassy in Tajikistan that includes an International Narcotics and Law Enforcement officer, a senior law enforcement advisor, program managers for border security and policing, and a construction engineer. The Drug Enforcement Agency also has an office in Dushanbe. The Defense Department’s Office of Defense Cooperation manages U.S. Central Command’s counter-narcotics program in Tajikistan. The embassy’s border and law



Source: Map Resources. Adapted by CRS.

¹ The White House. *Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations, FY2010*, May 12, 2009.

² The White House. *Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations, FY2010*.

enforcement working group coordinates the agency programs to train and equip police and other security-related personnel and to renovate border outposts.³

Cooperation on Counter-Terrorism

After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, Tajikistan seemed to be willing to cooperate with the United States, but hesitated to do so without permission from Moscow. However, Tajikistan had long supported the Afghan Northern Alliance's combat against the Taliban, so it was predisposed to welcome U.S.-led backing for the Northern Alliance. Perhaps after gauging Russia's views, the Tajik Defense Ministry on September 25, 2001, offered use of Tajik airspace to U.S. forces, and some coalition forces began to transit through Tajik airspace and airfields. U.S., French, and British personnel have used the Dushanbe airport for refueling (the French maintain a presence of 100-200 personnel and some aircraft), but the airport's limited capacity precludes wider coalition use.

During a January 2009 visit, the Commander of the U.S. Central Command, General David Petraeus, praised Tajikistan's support for Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan by granting overflight and basing rights. While there, he reached agreement with President Rahmon on the land transit of commercial goods such as construction materials to rebuild infrastructure and otherwise to support coalition operations in Afghanistan.⁴

The State Department's Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism warns that terrorists and others are able to exploit Tajikistan's 870-mile border with Afghanistan to smuggle illicit goods into and across Tajikistan in part because Tajik border guards and police are "not motivated to interdict smugglers or traffickers due to systematic corruption, low income, conscripted service, and lack of support from senior Tajik government officials."⁵ Tajik officials have argued that terrorism has increased in recent months, including as a result of military actions in Pakistan and Afghanistan that are causing some terrorists to enter Tajikistan. On July 8, 2008, members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) terrorist group reportedly attacked a police post in

Basic Facts

Area and Population: Land area is 55,800 sq. mi., slightly smaller than Wisconsin. Population is 7.35 million (The World Factbook, mid-2009 est.). The Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Region has called for greater autonomy, which is opposed by the Tajik government.

Ethnicity: 79.9% of the population is Tajik, 15.3% Uzbek, 1.1% Russian, 1.1% Kyrgyz (2000 Census). Clan and regional identities include the Khojenti, Kulyabi, Garmi, and Pamiri groups.

Gross Domestic Product: \$15.4 billion; per capita GDP is about \$2,100 (The World Factbook, 2008 est., purchasing power parity).

Political Leaders: President: Emomali Rahmon; Prime Minister: Oqil Oqilov; Speaker of the National Assembly (upper chamber): Mahmadsaid Ubaydulloyev; Speaker of the Assembly of Representatives (lower chamber): Saydullo Khayrulloev; Foreign Minister: Hamrokhon Zarifi; Defense Minister: Col. Gen. Sherali Khayrulloev.

Biography: Rahmon was born in 1952 and trained as an economist. In 1988, he became a state farm director in Kulyab region. His rise to power was boosted by his links to the paramilitary leader and ex-convict Sangak Safarov. He became chair of the Kulyab regional government in late 1992, and weeks later was elected chair of the Supreme Soviet and proclaimed head of state. He was popularly elected president in 1994 and re-elected in 1999 and 2006.

³ U.S. Department of State. *2009 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, February 27, 2009.

⁴ U.S. Embassy in Tajikistan. *Press Release: U.S. Centcom Commander Visits Tajikistan*, January 17, 2009; *Press Briefing by General David Petraeus, Commander, US Central Command*, January 17, 2009.

⁵ U.S. Department of State. *Country Reports on Terrorism 2008, Chapter 2: South and Central Asia*, April 30, 2009

Tajikistan's eastern Tavildara district. These attackers belonged to a larger group that allegedly included some Chechens and others who had arrived from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Police defeated them on July 11, killing a local warlord who allegedly was involved with the group. On July 18, 2009, three alleged IMU terrorists were stopped in Mountainous Badakhshan on their way to Dushanbe, where they reportedly were to carry out attacks as ordered by Tohir Yuldash, the head of the IMU. They were said to have been involved earlier in combat in Pakistan's Waziristan area against government troops. Two explosions took place at the Dushanbe airport and a hotel on July 26. Although there were no casualties, some observers speculated that the explosions were a warning ahead of a meeting by the Presidents of Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan in Dushanbe at the end of July on regional transport and communications. According to Tajik Interior Minister Abdurahim Qahhorov, the attacks might be linked to a Taliban threat in May 2009 that Tajikistan would be targeted if it permitted U.S. and NATO transit.⁶ In contrast, Islamic Renaissance Party leader Muhiddin Kabiri has stated that growing extremism is mainly a domestic problem based on inadequate democratization and poverty.⁷

Foreign Policy and Defense

In April 2008, President Rahmon stated that Tajikistan was ready to “further expand relations of cooperation with countries of the West and the East, as well as those of the Islamic world, from the point of view of our open-door foreign policy.” He pledged that Tajikistan would “expand constructive collaboration with the United States, the European Union and other countries of the [anti-terrorist] coalition not only in this important field, but will also pay more attention to expanding beneficial economic cooperation.” In November 2007, Rahmon explained that Tajikistan's “open door” foreign policy—“cooperation with any entity of international relations which has good intentions and aims towards our country”—might not please certain unnamed “powerful countries,” but that the policy prevented Tajikistan from becoming a “puppet.” He has warned that Tajikistan faces a global environment where “the rivalry between different countries for international markets, resources of raw materials, fuel and energy reserves, and other natural wealth” is growing, and where arms races are intensifying. He has called instead for “beneficial international cooperation to reduce and prevent new global threats and dangers, [such as] terrorism, extremism, drugs production and trafficking, [and] organized transnational crime.”⁸

Tajikistan is interested in the political and human rights of approximately seven million ethnic Tajiks residing in Afghanistan (25% of the population) and over one million in Uzbekistan (4%). Relations with Uzbekistan have been problematic, including disagreements about water-sharing, Uzbek gas supplies, and environmental pollution. Uzbekistan has strenuously objected to Tajikistan's construction of the Roghun hydroelectric dam, which it fears will reduce water flow to Uzbekistan. In mid-June 2009, Tajik presidential advisor Suhrob Sharipov asserted that the salvation of the people of Tajikistan depended on the construction of the dam, so that opposing the construction was traitorous.

⁶ Open Source Center. *Central Eurasia: Daily Report* (hereafter *CEDR*), July 28, 2009, Doc. No. CEP-950255; *Greater Middle East: Daily Report*, May 3, 2009, Doc. No. GMP-693001.

⁷ *CEDR*, July 28, 2009, Doc. No. CEP-950152.

⁸ *CEDR*, November 16, 2007, Doc. No. CEP-950361; April 25, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-950185; September 8, 2007, Doc. No. CEP-950171.

The Tajik armed forces consist of about 8,800 ground, air force-air defense, and mobile (rapid reaction) troops.⁹ There also are about 3,800 paramilitary personnel in the Interior Ministry, 1,200 in the National Guard, and 2,500 in the Emergencies Ministry. The armed forces are underfunded and fractured by regional clan loyalties that compromise their effectiveness. According to Defense Minister Serali Khayrulloev, a mobile (rapid reaction) force recently was created as a third branch of the armed forces from subunits of the other branches as “a quality enhancement of combat readiness and [to ensure] a swift reaction to a change in the situation in the country and region.”¹⁰ A 10-year (with options for renewal) Tajik-Russian basing agreement was signed in October 2004 that provides for Russia’s former 201st Motorized Rifle Division to be based at three garrisons and to have access to three training grounds. Tajikistan also transferred ownership of the Okno space tracking base (near the town of Nurek) to Russia. In exchange, Russia cancelled a \$242 million debt. Russia’s approximately 5,500 contract troops in Tajikistan constitute its second-largest military presence abroad, after the Black Sea Fleet in Ukraine. Tajikistan assumed control from Russia over guarding its borders in June 2005, although about 50 Russian border guard advisors and 20 instructors remain. In November 2006, Tajikistan and Russia signed an agreement to hold joint military training operations. Many Tajik officers receive training at Russian military schools.

Tajikistan is a signatory of the Collective Security Treaty (CST) of the CIS (led by Russia). In 2001, CST members approved the creation of a regional Anti-Terrorist Center (composed of intelligence agencies) and regional rapid-deployment military forces that include a Tajik battalion. In 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO; an economic and security organization led by China and Russia and including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) also approved the creation of an anti-terrorist regional center. Tajikistan joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace in February 2002. At the signing, a NATO press release hailed Tajikistan’s support to coalition forces in Afghanistan as “of key importance” to combating international terrorism. Tajikistan’s then-Defense Minister Khayrulloev stated in March 2006, however, that Tajikistan intended to continue to rely on Russia for equipment and training.

The Tajik Civil War

Tajikistan was among the Central Asian republics least prepared and inclined toward independence when the Soviet Union broke up. In September 1992, a loose coalition of nationalist, Islamic, and democratic parties and groups tried to take over. Kulyabi and Khojenti regional elites, assisted by Uzbekistan and Russia, launched a successful counteroffensive that by the end of 1992 had resulted in 20,000-40,000 casualties and up to 800,000 refugees or displaced persons. In 1993, the CIS authorized “peacekeeping” in Tajikistan, consisting of Russian and token Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek troops. After the two sides agreed to a cease-fire, the U.N. Security Council established a small U.N. Mission of Observers in Tajikistan (UNMOT) in December 1994. In June 1997, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon and then-rebel leader Sayed Abdullo Nuri signed a *comprehensive peace agreement*. Benchmarks of the peace process were largely met, and UNMOT pulled out in May 2000, but Russian troops have remained. Stability in Tajikistan is fragile. Observers remain concerned about possible secessionism in the northern Soghd (formerly Leninabad) region and in the eastern Mountainous Badakhshan region, and tensions between ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks within Tajikistan.

⁹ *The Military Balance*, February 1, 2009.

¹⁰ *CEDR*, June 14, 2009, Doc. No. CEP-549001.

Political Developments

Since the end of the civil war in 1997, President Emomali Rahmon has steadily increased his authoritarian rule and marginalized the opposition. His ambit remains limited, however, by myriad local warlords. A legislative electoral law was approved in late 1999 calling for a lower chamber, the Assembly of Representatives, to consist of 63 members (22 elected by party list and 41 in single-member districts), and an upper legislative chamber, the National Assembly, to consist of 34 members representing regional interests (25 selected by indirect voting by local council assemblies, eight appointed by Rahmon, and one reserved for the former president). Another referendum on changes to the constitution was held in June 2003. Opposition critics correctly predicted that one of the changes—limiting a president to two seven-year terms—would permit Rahmon to claim two more terms in office under the “new” amendment.

The three registered opposition parties are the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), Social Democratic Party (SDP), and the Communist Party (CP). The CP sometimes allies itself with the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP). About 160 candidates (mostly PDP members) ran for the district seats in the February 2005 election to the Assembly of Representatives (lower legislative chamber). The OSCE reported “large-scale irregularities,” including the presence of government officials on many electoral commissions, close government control of campaigning, ballot box stuffing, and doubtful ballot counting. After runoffs in March, the PDP had won 51 seats, the CP five, the Islamic Revival Party two, and independents five. The next legislative election is scheduled for February 2010.

Five candidates ran in the presidential election in Tajikistan held on November 6, 2006, including incumbent President Rahmon. All four “challengers” praised Rahmon and campaigned little. Rahmon officially received 79.3% of 2.88 million votes with a nearly 91% turnout. According to OSCE observers, the race was slightly improved over the 1999 presidential election but still lacked “genuine choice and meaningful pluralism,” including because of the dearth of meaningful debate by the candidates, improbable turnout figures in some precincts, use of administrative resources, and non-transparent vote-counting.¹¹ A new presidential election is scheduled for 2013.

Changes to the law on legislative elections have been under consideration since 2008. The opposition parties have proposed several amendments to the bill, including placing opposition representatives on electoral commissions, lowering the threshold of party list votes necessary for a party to gain legislative seats, and reducing or eliminating the election deposit, which the parties claim deters prospective candidates from running. Only after a new law is passed “can we talk about conducting democratic elections,” one IRP official has asserted.

President Rahmon increasingly has used rhetoric associated with Hanafi Sunni Islam and Tajik nationalism to define his rule. This rhetoric has alienated ethnic and religious minorities, including ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Pamiris in Mountainous Badakhshan who practice Ismaili Shiism. In July 2009, President Rahmon proposed banning the use of Russian as “the language of interethnic communication” to strengthen the use of Tajik. Some observers suggested that the proposal would most impact ethnic Uzbeks, who are much more numerous than ethnic Russians.

¹¹ OSCE. Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. *Final Report on the 6 November 2006 Presidential Election in Tajikistan*, April 18, 2007.

President Rahmon appeared to step up arrests of oppositionists and purported Islamic extremists in mid-2009. Some observers claim that Rahmon is combating an influx of Islamic extremists from Afghanistan and Pakistan. According to the State Department, Islamic extremism may be increasing in northern Tajikistan, including the presence of al Qaeda.¹² While acknowledging the dangers of extremists entering the country, other observers suggest that the crackdown is mainly aimed at quelling rising economic discontent that threatens the regime.

Human Rights

According to the State Department's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2008*, the Tajik government's human rights record remained poor during the year. Security officials continued to use coercion to extract confessions during interrogations. There were few checks on the power of prosecutors and police to make arrests. Police often harassed the families of suspects in pretrial detention to elicit confessions. Those who were indicted were invariably found guilty. The executive branch and criminal networks exerted pressure on prosecutors and judges. Corruption and inefficiency in the judicial system were significant problems. Opposition parties and local observers claimed that the government selectively prosecuted political opponents. Authorities intimidated and otherwise discouraged oppositionists from speaking freely or critically, including through a law criminalizing insults to the president. The government continued to control most printing presses and the media practiced self-censorship out of fear of government reprisals. A new law on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) placed greater bureaucratic burdens on a required re-registration process that greatly reduced the number of domestic and international NGOs in the country. Authorities occasionally harassed journalists, including through warnings, prosecutions, and tax inspections. While the three legal opposition parties were generally able to operate, they had scant access to state-run media. Restrictions on religious freedom continued. Corruption and nepotism were pervasive. Human trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced labor were serious problems. Several sources alleged that some government officials were patrons or protectors of traffickers.¹³

Economic Issues

Tajikistan's economic decline reversed in 1997 as the peace accords that ended the civil war took hold. GDP grew about 7.9% and consumer price inflation was 11.8% in 2008 (*The World Factbook* est.). Tajikistan has depended heavily on foreign loans and aid to cover its budget and trade deficits. Tajikistan's foreign debt was officially stated to be \$1.47 billion in July 2009. Most small enterprises had been privatized by 2000, but land and major enterprises remain state-owned. Tajikistan's aluminum smelter in Tursunzade, one of the world's largest, accounts for three-fourths of Tajikistan's exports. Cotton and hydro-electricity have been other exports. The agricultural sector employs two-thirds of the labor force. Up to one million Tajiks—nearly 50% of the labor force—are labor migrants, and up to two-thirds of the remaining population lives in poverty, according to *The World Factbook*.

The global economic downturn has depressed prices for Tajik commodity exports (mainly aluminum and cotton) and reduced worker remittances 30% in the first quarter of 2009 from the same period a year before. The Tajik currency, the somoni, has lost over one-quarter of its value

¹² U.S. Department of State. *Country Reports on Terrorism 2009*, April 30, 2009.

¹³ U.S. Department of State. *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2008*, February 25, 2009.

against the dollar in recent months, which has greatly increased the costs of imported food and other goods. In late June 2009, Rahmon boosted salaries for various government workers to counteract their declining purchasing power. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) warns that a decline of industrial production and commodity export prices, along with the return of many migrant workers, may result in a 3% contraction of GDP in 2009. The EIU views the Rahmon regime as moving to head off possible instability posed by these trends by cracking down on perceived Islamic fundamentalism, urging the opposition to focus on the upcoming 2010 legislative election, and being prepared to use force to quell social unrest.¹⁴ The NGO International Crisis Group (ICG) similarly has warned that increasingly serious economic problems will condemn the “desperately poor population ... to yet more deprivation. ... To address the situation, the international community ... should ensure any assistance reaches those who truly need it, place issues of governance and corruption at the centre of all contacts with the Tajik government, and initiate an energetic dialogue with President Rahmon on democratization.”¹⁵

According to the State Department, between 15% and 30% of heroin and opium from Afghanistan transits Tajikistan to Russia, China, and Europe. Tajikistan also is a major center for domestic and international drug trafficking organizations. Although it is difficult to measure drug-related and other corruption, “there is certainly a striking discrepancy between the extravagant lifestyles of some senior officials and their nominal government salaries,” according to the State Department. It also warns that “the culture of corruption fueled by the huge amount of drugs passing through the country poses a significant threat to Tajikistan’s stability and prosperity.”¹⁶

Among prominent corruption cases, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) announced in early 2008 that it was demanding the early repayment of a small portion of a loan to Tajikistan. While receiving IMF loans, the Tajik National Bank had failed to report that its reserves had been depleted. President Rahmon removed the National Bank chief, but then appointed him deputy prime minister.¹⁷ Despite this, the IMF in April 2009 announced a \$120 million loan to Tajikistan to address poverty reduction and economic growth. The European Union announced in June 2009 that it was providing 2 million euros to train Tajik personnel to improve the effectiveness and transparency of state financial management.

During the winters of 2007-2008 and 2008-2009, severe weather and electricity, gas, and food shortages led the Tajik government to declare a humanitarian crisis and ask international donors for assistance. Heavy spring 2009 rains further damaged agriculture and caused mudslides that killed dozens and left thousands homeless. Despite the rains, the Tajik Deputy Minister of Energy and Industry, Muhammadsharif Haqdodov, reported in July 2009 that electric power generation at the Nurek dam had been reduced by 10% in the first half of 2009 compared to the same period last year in order to preserve water resources. Tajikistan exported some electricity in the summer of 2008 to Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, and is constructing a 220 kv, 170-mile transmission line from the Sangtuda-1 hydroelectric power plant to the Afghan town of Pol-e Khomri. The line is expected to be completed by the end of 2010. About one-half of the \$23 million project is funded by the Asian Development Bank.

¹⁴ Economist Intelligence Unit. *Tajikistan Country Report*, June 15, 2009.

¹⁵ ICG. *Tajikistan: On the Road to Failure*, February 12, 2009.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of State. *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2009*, February 27, 2009.

¹⁷ “Tajikistan: Cotton Banking Leading To Ruin,” *Eurasia Insight*, April 17, 2009; “Tajikistan: Financial Scandal Brings Fresh Disgrace to Dushanbe,” *Eurasia Insight*, April 13, 2009.

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