

<b>REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE</b>			<i>Form Approved</i> OMB No. 0704-0188	
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<b>1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)</b> 15 April 2015		<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> Master of Military Studies Research Paper		<b>3. DATES COVERED (From - To)</b> September 2014 - April 2015
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b> Tajikistan: Evolution or Status Quo?			<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b> N/A	
			<b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b> N/A	
			<b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b> Ms. Sarah J. Prescott U.S. Department of State			<b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b> N/A	
			<b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b> N/A	
			<b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> USMC Command and Staff College Marine Corps University 2076 South Street Quantico, VA 22134-5068			<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> N/A			<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b> N/A	
			<b>11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)</b> N/A	
<b>12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.				
<b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b> N/A				
<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> TAJIKISTAN TRANSITIONED FROM A CLAN-BASED CULTURE INTO A NATION-STATE UNDER SOVIET COLLECTIVISM, BEGINNING IN THE 1920'S UNTIL THE FALL OF THE SOVIET UNION IN 1991. THE TAJIK POPULATION, WRIT LARGE, CONTINUES TO EMBODY A COMMUNITY-BASED SYSTEM BASED ON RELATIONSHIPS, SEPARATE FROM AND BEHOLDEN TO THE GOVERNING STRUCTURE. TAJIKISTAN DOES NOT HAVE THE CULTURAL OR INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATION FROM WHICH WESTERN NATIONS HAVE EVOLVED, SUCH AS THE RULE OF LAW, PERSONAL FREEDOM, AND DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES. THE RESULT IS A POPULATION VULNERABLE TO LEADERS WHO BENEFIT FROM THE SOCIETY'S MINIMALISTIC OUTLOOK IN ORDER TO MAINTAIN THEIR POWER AND INFLUENCE. REAL CHANGE WILL ONLY HAPPEN IF THE TAJIK GOVERNMENT INSTITUTES POLICIES THAT WILL ENABLE SUSTAINABLE INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT, INVESTMENT, AND PRIVATE ENTERPRISE, THUS CREATING A FOUNDATION FOR THE POPULATION AND GOVERNMENT TO WORK AND GROW TOGETHER. UNFORTUNATELY, THERE IS NO DEMONSTRATED MOTIVATION FOR CHANGE BY EITHER THE TAJIK POPULATION OR THE GOVERNMENT.				
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS</b> Tajikistan, social media, migration, remittances, Russia, Soviet Union, earthquake, education, healthcare, illicit drug trade, food				
<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>			<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b> UU	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b> 28
<b>a. REPORT</b> Unclass	<b>b. ABSTRACT</b> Unclass	<b>c. THIS PAGE</b> Unclass		
			<b>19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code)</b> (703) 784-3330 (Admin Office)	

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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**Tajikistan: Evolution or Status Quo?**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES.

**Ms. Sarah J. Prescott**

AY 14-15

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## Executive Summary

**Title:** Tajikistan: Evolution or Status Quo?

**Author:** Ms. Sarah J. Prescott, United States Department of State

**Thesis:** While there is a sense of stability within Tajikistan, this is largely due to the population's non-existent expectations and limited external threats. The Tajik people are largely ignored by the governing structure, left to provide for themselves, and predominately focused on survival, except when the government exploits the population for its financial gain.

**Discussion:** Tajikistan transitioned from a clan-based culture into a nation-state under Soviet collectivism, beginning in the 1920's until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. The Tajik population, writ large, continues to embody a community-based system based on relationships, separate from and beholden to the governing structure. Tajikistan does not have the cultural or intellectual foundation from which Western nations have evolved, such as the rule of law, personal freedom, and democratic principles. The result is a population vulnerable to leaders who benefit from the society's minimalistic outlook in order to maintain their power and influence.

**Conclusion:** Real change will only happen if the Tajik government institutes policies that will enable sustainable infrastructure development, investment, and private enterprise, thus creating a foundation for the population and government to work and grow together. Unfortunately, there is no demonstrated motivation for change by either the Tajik population or the government.

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*Illustrations*

	Page
Figure 1. Soviet Socialist Republics in Central Asia.....	3
Figure 2. Regions of Tajikistan.....	7
Figure 3. Foreign Fighter Flows into Syria.....	16
Figure 4. Tajikistan: Hazard Distribution Map.....	18

## *Table of Contents*

	Page
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....	ii
DISCLAIMER .....	iii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .....	iv
PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	vi
REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE.....	vii
INTRODUCTION .....	1
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.....	1
Tajikistan in Soviet Union .....	1
Independence .....	4
Civil War.....	4
Post Civil-War .....	5
INTERNAL FACTORS.....	6
Demographics and Geographic Position.....	6
Socio-Economic Conditions .....	8
Economic Stability.....	9
Education, Healthcare and Food Insecurity .....	10
Illicit Drug Trade .....	11
Social Media .....	12
EXTERNAL FACTORS .....	13
Russian Interests .....	13
Tajik Fighters in Foreign Conflicts.....	15
NATURAL DISASTER – A CATALYST FOR CHANGE? .....	17
CONCLUSIONS.....	19
CITATIONS AND FOOTNOTES .....	21
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	25

## *Preface*

I was afforded the opportunity to attend the U.S. Marine Corps University thanks to the nomination from the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs within the U.S. Department of State. Prior to attending U.S. Marine Corps Command and Staff, I spent the last five years serving as the Tajikistan country desk officer for the Office of Central Asian Affairs. As the Tajikistan desk officer, it was my responsibility to coordinate the watershed of U.S. foreign policy on Tajikistan with the U.S. interagency including political, economic, military, humanitarian, cultural, educational, health, energy, and environmental sectors. I have had the privilege to repeatedly travel to Tajikistan, visiting three of the four provincial capitals, visiting the outskirts of Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast – the fourth province, and experiencing first-hand the humble, hospitable, and rich Tajik culture.

## *Acknowledgements*

While researching and writing this paper, I received guidance and assistance from my friend and former Security Advisor for the UN Office of Drugs and Crime in Tajikistan, Dushanbe Colonel Wendy Fontela (USMC, retired) as well as from faculty and staff at the Marine Corps University, Marine Corps Command and Staff College. I would like to thank my Faculty Advisors, Lieutenant Colonel Scott Conway and Dr. William Gordon for providing exceptional guidance and support throughout the academic year. The Leadership Communications Skills Center, particularly Christi A. Bayha, for providing outstanding research support throughout the Masters process. I would like to express my most sincere gratitude to Dr. Douglas Streusand who provided instrumental insight, direction, and perspective throughout this research study.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their unwavering love, support, and patience as I complete this academic year.

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE		FORM APPROVED - - - OMB NO. 0704-0188	
<small>PUBLIC REPORTING BURDEN FOR THIS COLLECTION OF INFORMATION IS ESTIMATED TO AVERAGE 1 HOUR PER RESPONSE, INCLUDING THE TIME FOR REVIEWING INSTRUCTIONS, SEARCHING EXISTING DATA SOURCES, GATHERING AND MAINTAINING THE DATA NEEDED, AND COMPLETING AND REVIEWING THE COLLECTION OF INFORMATION. SEND COMMENTS REGARDING THIS BURDEN ESTIMATE OR ANY OTHER ASPECT OF THIS COLLECTION OF INFORMATION, INCLUDING SUGGESTIONS FOR REDUCING THIS BURDEN, TO WASHINGTON HEADQUARTERS SERVICES, DIRECTORATE FOR INFORMATION OPERATIONS AND REPORTS, 1215 JEFFERSON DAVIS HIGHWAY, SUITE 1204, ARLINGTON, VA 22202-4302, AND TO THE OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET, PAPERWORK REDUCTION PROJECT (0704-0188) WASHINGTON, DC 20503</small>			
1. AGENCY USE ONLY (LEAVE BLANK)	2. REPORT DATE	3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED <i>STUDENT RESEARCH PAPER</i>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <i>TAJIKISTAN: EVOLUTION OR STATUS QUO?</i>		5. FUNDING NUMBERS <i>N/A</i>	
6. AUTHOR <i>MS. SARAH PRESCOTT, CG 12 U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE</i>			
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <i>USMC COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE 2076 SOUTH STREET, MCCDC, QUANTICO, VA 22134-5068</i>		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER <i>NONE</i>	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <i>SAME AS #7.</i>		10. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER: <i>NONE</i>	
11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES <i>NONE</i>			
12A. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <i>NO RESTRICTIONS</i>		12B. DISTRIBUTION CODE <i>N/A</i>	
ABSTRACT (MAXIMUM 200 WORDS)  <i>TAJIKISTAN TRANSITIONED FROM A CLAN-BASED CULTURE INTO A NATION-STATE UNDER SOVIET COLLECTIVISM, BEGINNING IN THE 1920'S UNTIL THE FALL OF THE SOVIET UNION IN 1991. THE TAJIK POPULATION, WRIT LARGE, CONTINUES TO EMBODY A COMMUNITY-BASED SYSTEM BASED ON RELATIONSHIPS, SEPARATE FROM AND BEHOLDEN TO THE GOVERNING STRUCTURE. TAJIKISTAN DOES NOT HAVE THE CULTURAL OR INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATION FROM WHICH WESTERN NATIONS HAVE EVOLVED, SUCH AS THE RULE OF LAW, PERSONAL FREEDOM, AND DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES. THE RESULT IS A POPULATION VULNERABLE TO LEADERS WHO BENEFIT FROM THE SOCIETY'S MINIMALISTIC OUTLOOK IN ORDER TO MAINTAIN THEIR POWER AND INFLUENCE. REAL CHANGE WILL ONLY HAPPEN IF THE TAJIK GOVERNMENT INSTITUTES POLICIES THAT WILL ENABLE SUSTAINABLE INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT, INVESTMENT, AND PRIVATE ENTERPRISE, THUS CREATING A FOUNDATION FOR THE POPULATION AND GOVERNMENT TO WORK AND GROW TOGETHER. UNFORTUNATELY, THERE IS NO DEMONSTRATED MOTIVATION FOR CHANGE BY EITHER THE TAJIK POPULATION OR THE GOVERNMENT.</i>			
14. SUBJECT TERMS (KEY WORDS ON WHICH TO PERFORM SEARCH) <i>Tajikistan, social media, migration, remittances, Russia, Soviet Union, earthquake, education, healthcare, illicit drug trade, food insecurity, Civil War, independence, foreign fighters, and Lake Sarez.</i>		15. NUMBER OF PAGES: 28	
		16. PRICE CODE: <i>N/A</i>	
17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT <i>UNCLASSIFIED</i>	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE: <i>UNCLASSIFIED</i>	19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT <i>UNCLASSIFIED</i>	20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT

When the Soviet Union established Tajikistan in 1929, it was not their intention to establish a country that could function independently from the rest of the Soviet Union. Tajikistan was the poorest Soviet republics and is now the poorest of the post-Soviet states. Tajikistan has limited natural resources and minimal infrastructure that were intended for the rest of the USSR. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Tajikistan was left to make an independent country on its own. Chaos resulted as the factions engaged in a civil war (1991-1994). Following the civil war, the remaining Soviet-educated and Soviet-trained Tajik professionals established a Tajik government based in kleptocracy. As a result, the country became food insecure with weak educational and health systems, and a government characterized by corruption and disregard for the population. While there is a sense of stability within Tajikistan, this is largely due to the population's non-existent expectations and limited external threats. The Tajik people are largely ignored by the governing structure, left to provide for themselves, and predominately focused on survival, except when the government exploits the population for its financial gain. This paper will look at the prospect for political, economic, and cultural change. There are number of internal and external factors to be considered, which may contribute to an outcome of change or status quo: demographics, geography, social media, economic instability, corruption, the illicit narcotic trade, external interests, Tajik fighters returning from foreign conflicts, and natural disasters.

### Historical Background

#### *TAJIKISTAN IN SOVIET UNION – 1929-1991*

In 1929 the Soviet Union brought into existence the Soviet Socialist Republic of Tajikistan (SSRT); as part of the strategy to prevent pro-Islamic and pro-Turkic resistance in Central Asia.<sup>1</sup> The Tajik people are indigenous Persian speakers with

political and cultural affinities to Turkic, Mongol, and Chinese societies.<sup>2</sup> The inception of the SSRT was a positive step in terms of infrastructure, regional cooperation, and opportunity within the Soviet system. Tajikistan experienced religious repression and periodic political purges, but also had significant improvements in healthcare and education standards. The Soviet Union also instituted forced collectivization between 1929-31, requiring Tajiks to farm their precious arable land for cotton.<sup>3</sup> Therefore food had to be imported from outside the region. From Moscow's perspective, cotton a cotton monoculture in Tajikistan made sense.

To manage regional energy requirements as efficiently as possible, the Soviet Union orchestrated a giant regional energy program with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan sharing their surplus of hydropower in the spring/summer months with their downstream neighbors, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and, conversely, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan sharing their oil and gas excess in fall/winter months with their upstream neighbors, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The system collapsed when the Soviet Union fell. Today, regional tensions are exasperated over water and energy shortages and trade, especially between the presidents of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan where historical and personal animosity remains. Also, the Tajik government has limited resources to pay a profitable rate for natural gas or oil from Uzbekistan. Therefore, any attempt to reestablish the former energy program is not realistic.



Figure 1: Soviet socialist Republics in Central Asia.  
Source: *Le Journal International*<sup>4</sup>

Tajikistan was the only Soviet republic in which a clan system dominated society. “The clan system was used for its political leverage to accumulate wealth and power for the leaders of its local region in the north (Sughd Providence) at the expense of the rest of the republic.”<sup>5</sup> This system, referred to as “feudal socialism,” fostered corruption and nepotism, and arguably planted the seeds for the 1992 civil war between various clans.

Before the Soviet Union unexpectedly dissolved, the Tajik population became increasingly frustrated with the Soviet regime and demanded change. In 1985, under the newly arrived Gorbachev administration, Tajiks felt able to openly express discontent and new political parties emerged. Following the August 1991 abortive coup against Gorbachev, the Tajik Communist party lost its supremacy and other Tajik political parties pushed to end communist rule and sought free elections; Tajikistan’s nascent political parties were unprepared for full independence<sup>6</sup>

*INDEPENDENCE:*

Scrambling to establish a state, Tajikistan had its first presidential elections shortly after independence. The Tajik Communist Party won but only through terror and manipulation. Ethnic Tajik communists from Khujand in the north allied with Tajiks in Kulob (part of the Khatlon provinces) in the south to comprise the new government. This new government excluded non-communists and those from the other provinces, setting the stage for a vicious civil war.<sup>7</sup> Tajikistan declared itself as an independent nation on September 9, 1991, but lost half of its revenue as a result. Tajikistan found itself without financial support.

## CIVIL WAR

In December 1991, the opposition parties and much of the population did not accept the new government. The opposition demanded equal cultural recognition (power and prestige should not be restricted to only Khujand and Kulob cultures) and equal power sharing between all factions.<sup>8</sup> Violence shortly erupted in May 1992 between armed communists supporters and who was the opposition. By January 1993, over half a million people had fled the fighting in southwest Tajikistan into the northern border of Afghanistan. Almost 10 percent of the 5.5 million population were internally displaced persons (IDPs), and between 20,000-40,000 died within first year.<sup>9</sup>

The lack of a functioning government forces citizens to fend for themselves. The drug trade quickly became a major source of income for the average citizen as well as the power brokers waging the civil war. This development signaled an end to citizens depending on the government.<sup>10</sup> The power struggled also opened the door for warlords to assume control. The warlords' main objective was to gain as much local control and wealth as possible. "Cotton, aluminum, and drug revenue framed the conflict between the commanders of the government and the opposition."<sup>11</sup>

A cease-fire finally arrived in 1993, largely due to the presence of 25,000 Russian Federation peacekeeping forces. Lasting peace would not arrive until April 1994, when UN-sponsored peace negotiators arrived, finally resolving tensions over regional differences, and bringing together the government (pro-Communists from Kulob and Khujand) and the opposition. Both sides signed an agreement on cessation of hostilities on September 17, 1994.<sup>12</sup> On November 6, 1994, Emomali Rahmonov, a Kulobi, was elected president in an election widely recognized as fraudulent and all Khujandis were purged from the government. With only an agreement on the cessation of hostilities, in December 1996 the government and the opposition began a series of negotiations. President Rahmonov and Sayid Adbullo Nuri, leader of the united opposition, signed a peace accord on June 27, 1997. The accord established a power sharing arrangement and legalized some of the political entities part of the opposition.<sup>13</sup>

### *POST CIVIL WAR*

Since the end of the Civil War, President Rahmonov (now referring to as Rahmon, dropping the Russian suffix from his last name) has maintained a strong-arm hold on the country. The exodus of ethnic Russians and well-educated Tajiks, along with the wartime destruction of most of Soviet-era infrastructure, has left the country simply surviving. Provinces, industries, and even the drug trade, once controlled by warlords, are now rumored as owned by members of the Rahmon family. International organizations (IOs), foreign governments, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have grown accustomed to providing basic services to the population in lieu of the government. The fifteen-year coalition war in Afghanistan resulted in an increase in senior U.S. visits and an increase in foreign assistance to Tajikistan. With the international drawdown from Afghanistan, NGOs, IOs, and foreign government no

longer have the budgets or long-term interest necessary to justify the same level of funding for the region – including Tajikistan – that provides the majority of basic services to the population.

### Internal Factors

#### *DEMOGRAPHICS AND GEOGRAPHICAL POSITION*

Tajikistan is a mountainous country, roughly the size of Wisconsin, with some of the highest peaks in Central Asia. Its neighbors are Afghanistan, China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. The population of Tajikistan is approximately eight million. According to the *CIA World Fact Book*, ethnically, Tajikistan is comprised of Tajik 80%, Uzbek 15%, Russian 1%, Kyrgyz 1%, and other 3%.<sup>14</sup> Tajikistan is predominately Sunni Muslim, although there other forms of religion are accepted (Shia Muslim, Isma'ili Muslim, Catholicism, Jehovah's Witness, Judaism, and Baptism). However, as a result of some 70 years of Soviet secular rule, the government is extremely wary of any religious practice. The government believes any religious practice, particularly Muslim, is perverted into radicalism unless strictly controlled by the government. The government's view on radicalism has caused much concern and pushback from the international community. In 2009 the Tajik government signed into force the "Law on the Responsibility of Parents in Raising Children", which prohibits children under the age of eighteen from participating in religious communities. The Tajik government also denies women the right to pray in mosques.<sup>15</sup>

Tajikistan is divided between four major provinces:

- 1) Sughd: Provincial capital, Khujand;
- 2) Districts of Republican Subordination: National and provincial capital, Dushanbe;
- 3) Khatlon: Provincial capital: Qurghonteppa; and
- 4) Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO): Provincial capital, Khorogh.<sup>16</sup>



Figure 2: National and Provincial Capitals of Tajikistan  
 Source: 24 Point<sup>17</sup>

Tajikistan is ninety-three percent mountainous, particularly in the Provinces of Sughd and GBAO, providing isolating physically and politically provincial capitals of Khujand and Khorugh from the corrupt central government. Its major exports are cotton, aluminum, water, and labor. Tajikistan has the largest aluminum smelter in Central Asia near its border with Uzbekistan. It is highly dependent on food, oil and gas imports from Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, China and Russia. Russia and China are the top two-bidirectional trading partners with Tajikistan.

### *SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS*

With a majority of its citizen's predominately focused on survival, there is little initiative by citizens to press their government for a better quality of life. Citizens expect few public services from their government and therefore seek subsistence, housing, and employment on their own. They often travel outside of Tajikistan for higher paying jobs and send remittances back to their families. The country's limited infrastructure,

primarily from the Soviet-era, is decaying. Fortunately for Tajik citizens, they have the opportunity to leave the country for employment elsewhere, predominately Russia and Kazakhstan. More than fifty percent of Tajikistan's legitimate GDP is from remittances.

However, the mass migration of working age men to provide for their families has had a stark and traumatic effect on the social fabric of Tajikistan. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), eighteen percent of the Tajikistan population, predominately men migrate to Kazakhstan for menial work.<sup>18</sup> The 2009 Tajikistan Living Standards Measurement Survey (TLSS) reported labor migration from Tajikistan is widespread; "it is characterized by circular and return movements."<sup>19</sup> Tajik citizens may return to Tajikistan to visit family but eventually have to return to either Kazakhstan or Russia for jobs. Tajiks seeking jobs in Russia is often reported at one million (out of a population of eight million).<sup>20</sup>

When heads of the family must leave to make ends meet the impact on the Tajik family is detrimental. A recent report by UNICEF shows "many children left behind are exposed to bullying and suffer from depression as well as increased aggression and rebellion."<sup>21</sup> Within Tajikistan, the lack of a parental member, particularly father figures, leaves families and children especially open to feelings of being forgotten. Many husbands end up divorcing their Tajik wives in exchange for "new" families in Russia, leaving the Tajik wife penniless and ostracized. It is tradition in Tajik culture for wives to move in with their husband's family.<sup>22</sup> Although Tajik law requires husbands to support their families, even after divorce, often the marriages are undocumented, leaving the wife with little recourse to demand spousal support. International NGOs are trying to assist whenever possible but the need is too great.<sup>23</sup> It is unfortunate Tajik citizens cannot provide for their families in Tajikistan.

## *ECONOMIC STABILITY*

President Rahmon and his administration are predominately focused on power consolidation. They have little interest or capacity for providing the population basic services such as utilities, subsistence relief, employment, education, or healthcare. While the government enables its citizens to leave Tajikistan to obtain work and send remittances home, the government has little incentive to enhance the domestic job market. The ability to gain remittances reduces governmental incentive to develop a domestic job market. According to the World Bank list of remittance-dependent countries, Tajikistan tops the list among the Central Asian states.<sup>24</sup> The Tajiks overseas are predominately unskilled labor in construction, agriculture and maintenance.<sup>25</sup> The unofficial national unemployment rate is as high as forty percent but it is estimated to be as high as sixty percent in the rural area; 2.5 percent is the government-provided unemployment rate.<sup>26</sup> Thirty-six percent of Tajik citizens live below the poverty line. The Tajik government, instead of investing in domestic employment opportunities, focuses its limited resources on assistance for migrant workers. In July 2013, the Tajik government announced plans in coordination with the Red Crescent Society (RCS) to open migrant worker support centers around Tajikistan with the goal of protecting migrant's rights as well as raising their vocational and lingual skills.<sup>27</sup> While noble, one could argue these attempts are misguided with little domestic opportunity and the effects migration causes to the family structure.

## *EDUCATION, HEALTHCARE, AND FOOD SECURITY*

The government opposes students studying overseas at Islamic universities and madrassas. It believes Tajik students are exposed to extremist ideas, which, if applied when they return, could lead to destabilization of the country.<sup>28</sup> In 2008 a Gallop Poll

reported 76 percent of Tajiks said “religion played an important role in their daily lives; many parents seek to instill Islamic values in their children.”<sup>29</sup> Given the importance Tajik citizens place on religion, the strong preference is to send students overseas for a religious education; however, the government forces students to return and study in country.

The education level within Tajikistan is rapidly deteriorating. Most students are required to bribe their way into universities, for good grades, and even degrees. In 2007, the Tajikistan State Statistical Committee reported the average monthly wage for teachers was 141 Somoni (\$41 USD). In reality, salaries were less than a dollar a day. Unable to survive, teachers either look for other jobs or seek “subsidization” from their students. Teachers bribe their students for their grades, access to prestigious schools, and degrees. When the media site, EurasiaNet.org interviewed a 32-year-old teacher, he confirmed that paying for grades is a common practice. In another EurasiaNet.org interview, another professor confirmed, ““Our students only study for the diploma, not knowledge. Our students know it is easier and most common just to pay.””<sup>30</sup> The government is aware of the practice but does very little to curb it.

Tajikistan’s healthcare system, based on a decaying Soviet infrastructure, is extremely fragile. According to USAID, Tajikistan has one of the highest rates of tuberculosis (TB) in Central Asia. Due to an inadequate vaccination program, in 2010 a naturally occurring strain of polio killed 29 and infected 709.<sup>31</sup> Although water is one of the few natural resources that Tajikistan has in plenty, ironically it does not have enough safe drinking water for its population. Of those rural villages with access to water, over half of those households do not have access to safe, portable water. Often times the only

available water source is polluted irrigation water. As a result, according to the World Health Organization (WHO):

Waterborne diseases in Tajikistan account for 60 percent of gastroenteritis disorders such as diarrhea, dysentery, cholera and typhoid. Repeated illnesses linked to poor quality water not only keep children out of school and contribute to poor health outcomes, including stunted growth, but it is estimated that, in recent years, one in six deaths among children under age 5 in Tajikistan were linked to waterborne diseases.<sup>32</sup>

The country lacks the funds, expertise, and political will to solve this problem. IOs, NGOs, and foreign governments provide short-term, immediate assistance but will not make long-term investment without government support.

Food insecurity is a severe problem in Tajikistan. The population is not starving but is it malnourished. Children's growth is markedly stunted. The government has made decrees to grow more food and less cotton but little has changed on the ground. It is a Soviet legacy the country finds difficult to abandon. Worse, the government must depend on its neighbors and Russia to import food. It would behoove the country to use their precious arable land – six percent – towards growing food rather than cotton.

### *ILLICIT DRUG TRADE*

Eighty percent of Afghan heroin crosses Tajikistan's 1400km porous and mountainous border. The government may be complicit in the drug trade; an estimated 30-50 percent of the GDP is from the drug trade that is passes through legal border crossings.<sup>33</sup> The government placates foreign investors by promising improvements in combating the illicit drug trade but takes little action. There is little incentive to stop the drug trade since heroin trafficking is one of the few lucrative businesses in Tajikistan. The traffickers subsidize meager government salaries, especially at border crossings. Furthermore, the Tajik government is unwilling to hand over control of the border to the Russians because of their unwillingness to relinquish profits from the drug trade.

## *SOCIAL MEDIA*

As part of the larger military and humanitarian operations to stabilize Afghanistan, U.S. forces enhanced the fiber-optic cable network in Afghanistan, which, in turn, improved Tajikistan's network. The majority of Tajikistan's Internet delivery is through Afghanistan. There are approximately 700,000 Internet users in Tajikistan, which roughly translates to 10 percent of Tajik citizens as of December 2010.<sup>34</sup> The Internet serves as a vehicle for average Tajik citizens to access the outside world, beyond Russian news and propaganda, regardless of how remote their village.

Tajik government officials fear the flow of information. In July 2012, the Tajikistan government announced the formation of a task force "to monitor Internet activity for any insulting or slanderous content directed at the State."<sup>35</sup> This announcement came as violence erupted between government forces and local criminals in the Gorno-Badakhshan provincial capital of Khorogh after a government regional security chief was killed, allegedly by a former civil war opposition leader, over a squabble regarding smuggling routes. President Rahmon sent in special forces to apprehend the perpetrator and violence ensued.<sup>36</sup> The government imposed an information blackout on events in Khorogh. The head of the state communications service, Beg Zuhurov, claimed, "a stray bullet had severed telephone, mobile, and Internet connections to the region."<sup>37</sup> To date, the Tajik government has repeatedly shut down social-networks and media outlet websites such as YouTube, Facebook, lude Avesta, Asia Plus, (opposition website) Charoghi Ruz, and the popular Russian-language social network Odnoklassniki.<sup>38</sup>

The government also has a firm grip on print media outlets. The major news sources are *Asia Plus*, *Tojikiston*, and *Vecherny Dushanbe*; there are no daily news

publications. As of 2006 there were some 300 newspapers registered in Tajikistan but only half were active; the rest were either closed or dying out. In 2005, the government shut down four newspapers after printing what the government felt was slanderous.<sup>39</sup> Journalists have endured this tight space by either writing from exile or self-censoring their material to avoid any topics regarding the Presidential administration.

### External Factors

#### *RUSSIAN INTERESTS*

Tajikistan's relationship with Russia is complicated. It relies on Russia for oil products, food, and employment. Conversely, Russia has depended on the Tajik population to work undesirable jobs. The tradition of Tajiks migrating to Russia for employment dates back to the 1980s under Soviet rule to "address the problems of rural overpopulation and poverty;" however even then, local Tajik leaders noted with concern that "the absence of Soviet state investment in Tajikistan meant that migration to urban centers only had the effect of transferring rural poverty into urban poverty." Tajikistan received the least state investment per capita in the Soviet Union and remains highly dependent on Russia today.<sup>40</sup>

The Russian government can (and continues to) exert an exorbitant amount of pressure on the Tajik government, both intentionally and unintentionally. Russia's military incursions into Ukraine and corresponding international sanctions have had damaging effects on Tajik migrant workers. The Russian ruble hit an all-time-low of 80 to the dollar at the end of 2014.<sup>41</sup> As a result, there are reduced job opportunities and reduced pay for Tajiks in Russia. Additionally, newly revised Russian migration laws require all Tajik migrant workers to pay a \$262 USD one-time, right-to-work fee, further diminishing the limited benefits of being a migrant worker in Russia. The result has been

a significant exodus of Tajik workers from Russia. By the end of 2014, more than 178,000 Tajiks left Russia, and another 100,000 left by the end of January 2015, according to the Federal Migration Service.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to the degrading Russian economy and required one-time fee, in April 2014, President Putin signed into law new regulations, “requiring those applying for work permits in Russia to pass a Russian history and civics exam, in addition to an earlier requirement of a mandatory Russian-language test for foreign workers.” Russian officials defended the new laws as an effort to “legalize and better integrate migrant workers, most of whom come from former Soviet Central Asian Republic; many of whom work illegally.” In June 2014, the Russian Duma changed the migrant worker laws further stating Tajiks can no longer enter Russia on their domestic passport but must enter with an international passport. As of November 2014, Russian authorities have deported over 200,000 Tajik citizens for not having an international passport.<sup>43</sup> The cost of an international passport is between \$240–333USD. This is extremely expensive considering the minimum wage for Tajiks is \$43 per month.<sup>44</sup> These changes, on top of the right to work fees, mean most Tajiks will illegally enter Russia in order to work, opening up citizens to trafficking, slavery, and abhorrent living conditions.<sup>45</sup>

To date the Tajik government does not appear concerned by the new policies, but has focused on notifying Tajik migrants of the new laws.<sup>46</sup> The Tajik government would better serve its population if it either entered into a bilateral dialogue with the Russian government to identify a mutually beneficial agreement or focused on developing domestic job opportunities. Although many Tajiks are hopeful they can return to Russia in the spring, the declining Russian economy suggests otherwise. The IMF is concerned the return of migrant workers, reduction of Tajikistan’s overall GDP, and an influx of

unemployed males could result in popular unrest; however the government has yet to respond.<sup>47</sup>

The Russian government has stationed the 201<sup>st</sup> Brigade outside of Dushanbe since the collapse of the Soviet Union to serve as advisors to the Tajik government. The two sides also recently finalized a basing agreement to authorize Russia to occupy a military base in Ayni (10km west of Dushanbe) indefinitely. The decision to allow the base in Ayni was seen as an alternate to placate the Russians instead of allowing them to guard the borders, a further prize the Russians still seek.

#### *TAJIK FIGHTERS IN FOREIGN CONFLICTS*

Tajik citizens are making their way to Syria to serve as foreign fighters. Foreign fighter analysts estimate the number of Central Asian fighters in Syria somewhere between 400, 1000-5000. As of 2014, Tajik foreign fighter numbers were estimated to be fewer than 100.<sup>48</sup>

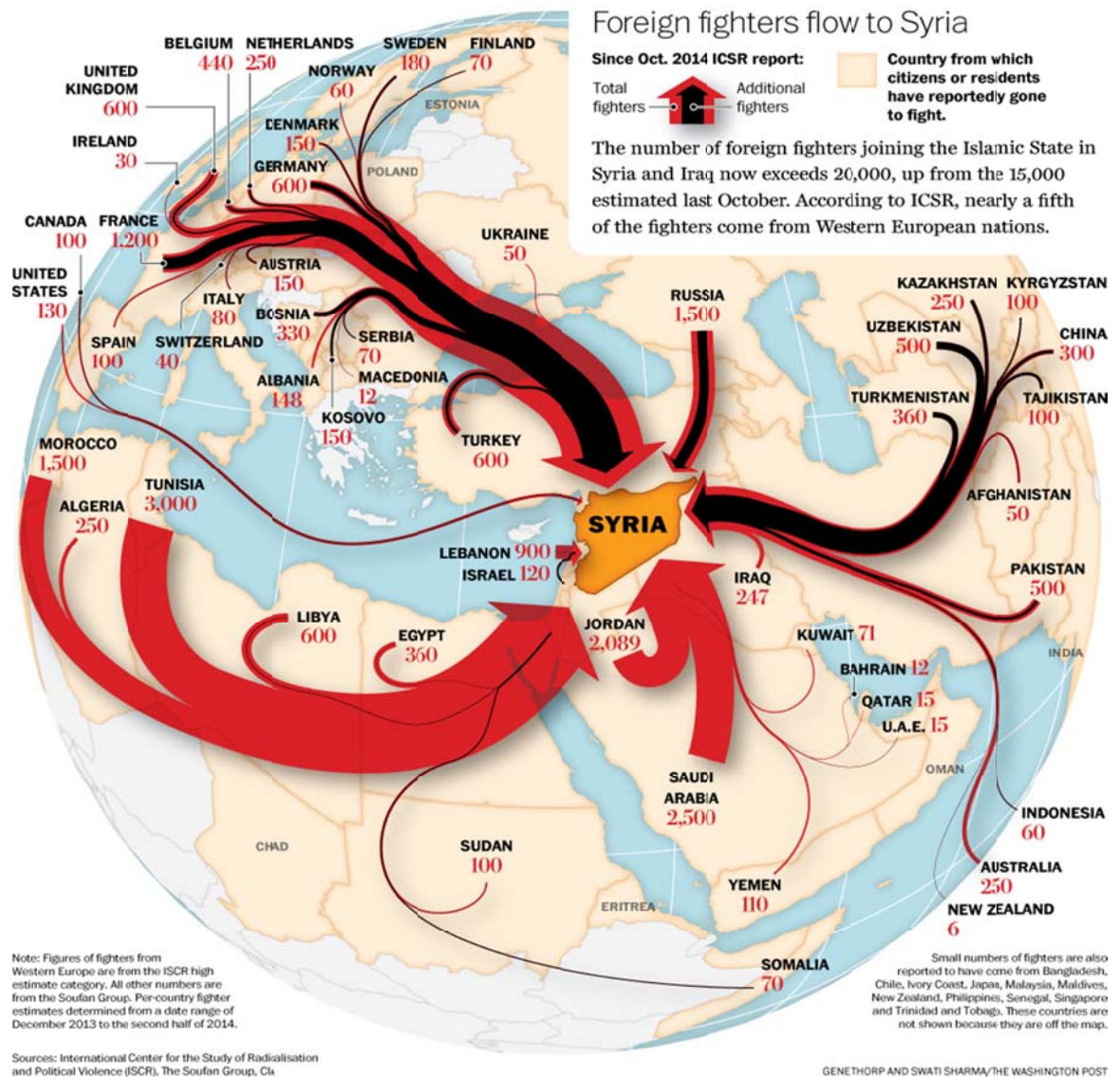


Figure 3: Foreign Fighters Flow to Syria

Source: International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR).<sup>49</sup>

Religious scholar, Faridun Khodizoda said, “young men suffering hardships in Tajikistan are vulnerable to militant promises of a better life and they find playing war to be interesting.”<sup>50</sup> Further, analysts believe it is more likely Tajiks would travel to Syria to fight with ISIS rather than Afghanistan because ISIS is winning and the Taliban are considered “dirty” and “dumb” – as Tajiks see Afghans.<sup>51</sup> It is also easier for Tajiks to travel to Syria than Afghanistan, with connections through Turkey and via Russia. Many migrant workers in Russia are being recruited as foreign fighters and sent to Syria. There

are mixed opinions in Tajikistan as to whether fighting in Syria is positive, for martyrdom, or simply something to do.<sup>52</sup> Regardless, given the number of Russian-speaking foreign fighters in Syria (Chechens, other Central Asians, etc.) and linguistic similarities, Tajiks have mobility in Syria and are easily integrated into ISIS operations.

It is unknown at this time whether Tajik foreign fighters would return to Tajikistan to support an overthrow of the government. The Tajik government, however, has made it clear that returning foreign fighters are not welcome. The government passed a new “law on mercenaries” according to which unrepentant militants can be sentenced to 20 years in prison.<sup>53</sup>

#### Natural Disaster – Catalyst for Change?

Unfortunately there is no crystal ball to foretell the future; it is the belief of this author; however that change for the Tajik people – for better or worse – will only come after a massive jolt to the system, such as an earthquake or other natural disaster. The Pamir Mountains, which cover the majority of Tajikistan’s landscape, are seismic hot spots that experience centennial quakes of magnitude 7 or greater on the Richter scale. Tajikistan experiences over 4,000 tremors on average every year.<sup>54</sup>

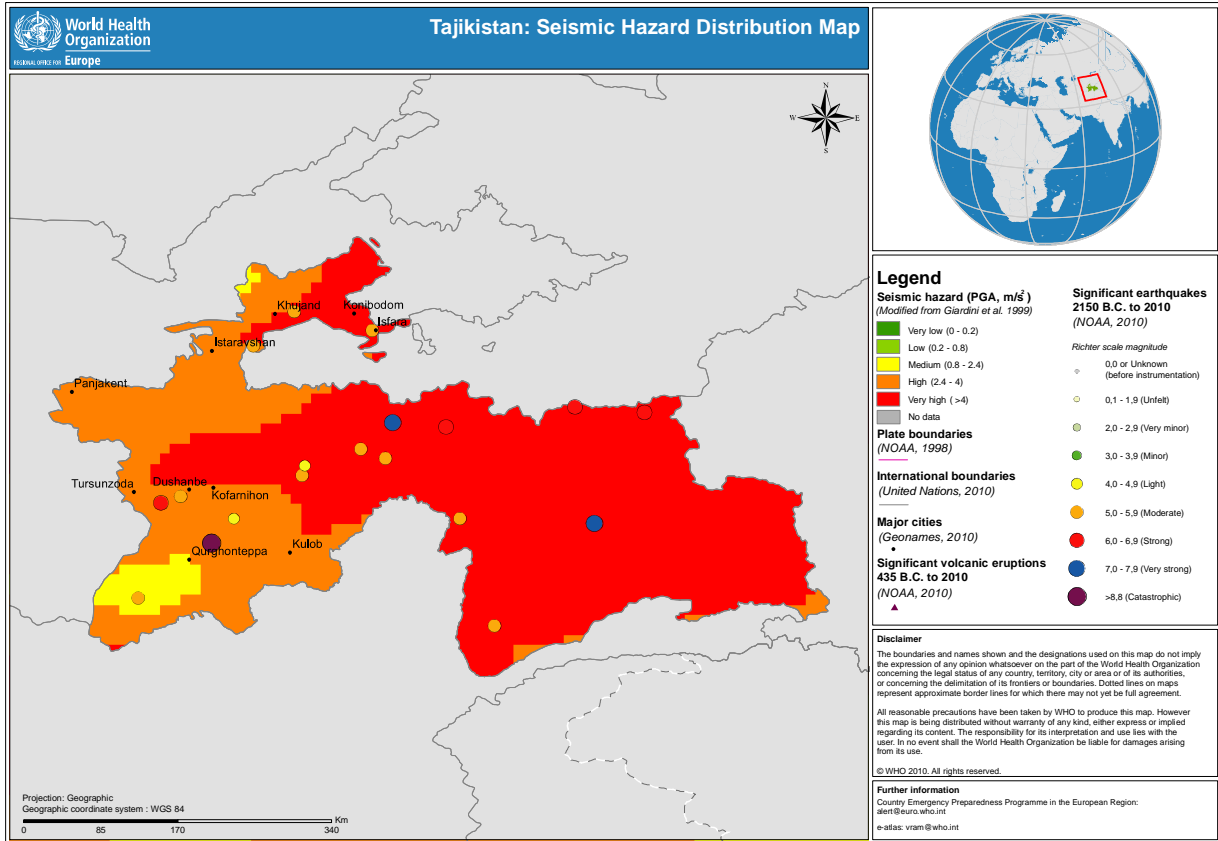


Figure 4: Tajikistan: Hazard Distribution Map  
Source: World Health Organization<sup>55</sup>

On February 18, 1911, the village of Sarez was buried by a 567-meter-high landslide caused from a magnitude 7.4 earthquake. The earthquake and subsequent landslide created the world's tallest natural dam, the Usoi Dam that impounds seventeen billion cubic meters of snow and glacier melt otherwise known as Lake Sarez.<sup>56</sup>

Scientists are concerned another earthquake could dislodge the dam, unleashing a wall of water, albeit unlikely. As a precautionary measure, Tajik and regional scientists are looking into options for early-warning systems as well as releasing water to relieve the pressure on the dam caused by the water and thus making it less susceptible to seismic movement. Lake Sarez itself is significant because of the volume of water it contains. "Lake Sarez has enough volume to provide drinking water for all of Central Asia," according to President Rahmon. He presented a proposal at the World Water

Forum in March 2008 to establish an international consortium to build a pipeline from Lake Sarez to Uzbekistan. To date neither financial commitments, nor political will has materialized.

Seismologists do believe Tajikistan is due for a repeat of the 1907 Dushanbe earthquake, which measured 7.4 on the Richter scale and killed 55,000, and destroyed large portions of the city. Either scenario would destroy the remaining- Soviet era infrastructure and leave the government with little financial or organizational recourse to rebuild or even respond to the needs of the population. Although the international community would likely step in to provide humanitarian assistance, there would be little incentive towards providing major infrastructure reconstruction beyond what currently exists, which is minimal at best.

Even without a natural cataclysm there is no demonstrated motivation for change by either the population or the government. The need, however, is there especially in light of the imminently imploding Russian economy and effect on remittances. This includes creating real job opportunities within Tajikistan, identifying realistic energy solutions (wind and solar power), countering narcotics trafficking, and ending endemic corruption.

### Conclusion

Tajikistan is a product of the Soviet Union. The Tajik leaders benefit from the society's minimalist outlook to maintain their power and influence. When independence unexpectedly came, the country was left to define itself. Regional clans fought for control, ultimately leading to a bloody civil war that severely degraded or destroyed the precious Soviet infrastructure. Since then, Tajikistan has remained the poorest of the

former Soviet Union states due to its lack of natural resources, lack of infrastructure investment, and endemic corruption.

The Rahmon Government continues to control all sources of political power while the population is left to fend for itself. Survival through any means necessary means drug trade, becoming foreign fighters, and migration to Russia or Kazakhstan, with little or no expectation of assistance from the government. International assistance and investment provides some basic support services, but the support is not sustainable in the absence of government commitment to developing sustainable infrastructure.

Real change will only happen if the Tajik government institutes policies that will enable sustainable infrastructure development, investment, and private enterprise, thus creating a foundation for the population and government to work and grow together. Depending on Russia and Kazakhstan for remittances is not the solution, only a temporary relief. The international community is encouraged to work with civilian and government leaders to help build the country from within, a country that can provide for its citizens.

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