



Islam and Political Violence in Tajikistan

An Ethnographic Perspective on the Causes and Consequences of the 2010 Armed Conflict in the Kamarob Gorge

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Abstract

This paper offers a preliminary and contemporaneous interpretation of the armed conflict in the Kamarob Gorge of Tajikistan between the national government and a local 'mujohid' group in late-2010. It does so via insights from ethnographic research prior to the violence, communications from local observers during the violence, and through the conceptual lens of local politics. A local politics approach analyses conflict neither in terms of global Islamic-secular confrontation nor national or international ethnopolitics. Rather, it draws attention to the specific dynamics of governance and business, which brought violence to this particular part of Tajikistan. We find a basis for centre-periphery conflict over political control and lootable resources but a lack of widespread support for the armed resistance. In such circumstances the relatively rapid breakdown of the 'Islamist insurgency' against the state should be of no surprise. We argue that this does not indicate the relative strength of the state versus society, not least because of the evident weakness of the armed forces of Tajikistan during the military campaign. Rather it suggests that militant Islam has little support in Kamarob, that local elites lack the capacity and interests to pursue an insurgency against the regime, and that these local political struggles are largely detached from the concerns of everyday life. However, we note that the Government of Tajikistan's response to the violence – an intensified national campaign against Islamic education and the legal Islamic Renaissance Party – risks, in the long-term, creating the very militancy that it is supposed to counter.

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1. Introduction

On 19 September 2010, a military convoy entered the Kamarob gorge of Tajikistan seeking to track down fugitives from a prison break in August. The convoy was attacked and 26 government troops – many of them young, poorly-trained conscripts – were shot and killed. The incident drew momentary international attention to Tajikistan and, particularly, the Kamarob gorge region in the east of the country. However, the government quickly enforced an information blackout and has issued threatening statements against Tajikistan's beleaguered independent press and threatened criminal charges against journalists who report more than the official line. As a consequence, reports in newspapers and on television cement the idea that Karategin, more specifically, vadi Rasht, the region of which Kamarob is part, is a hotbed of Islamic terrorists and radical Islamists. But they provide little detail of what is going on and are widely dismissed by residents and their relatives in the capital, Dushanbe. The effect of this has been to increase the production of rumours about what is happening and why.

Whilst much of the emerging English-language literature on post-Soviet Islam in Central Asia is extremely insightful (Khalid 2007, Louw 2007, Montgomery 2007, Mullojonov 2001, Rasanayagam 2010, Epkenhans 2011), most of the literature on the politics of Islam suffers from limitations due to its failure to account for the role of local politics.¹ In particular, four schools of thought can be identified in the literature. According to the first school, tension is caused by the secular state's wholesale exclusion or marginalization of Muslims (McGlinchey 2005). A second view is that tension is the work of global extremist groups espousing the creation/restoration of an Islamic Caliphate (Rashid 2002). The third view is that rising tension is part of a broader trend – a putative clash of Western and Muslim civilizations (Huntington 1993). The fourth explanation emphasizes differences in access to resources by various Muslim communities. However, none of these explanations takes account of local

¹ We thank Nick Megoran and Alisher Khamidov for drawing our attention to this way of breaking down the literature on political Islam in Central Asia.

Islamic politics – how in specific localities Islam can be drawn upon as a source of legitimacy for struggles against state actors.

Thirteen years after Tajikistan's general peace agreement, which ended its post-Soviet civil war (Akiner and Barnes 2001), how and why has conflict erupted again in Kamarob? The objective of this paper is to consider, in the aftermath of the conflict, its causes and consequences. The paper focuses on one village familiar to the authors – let us call it Shahrigul – which lies at the entrance of Kamarob. To the chagrin of its inhabitants, its strategic position has made it an object of attention for both the former opposition and state military troops. Yet its everyday life is altogether different. The village presents a mixed picture of resistance to, and coping with, the emergence of state power since the civil war. It is these two trends of conflict and accommodation that characterize the new conflict which broke out in Kamarob in 2010.

Based on ethnographic research conducted individually by the two authors in the Rasht valley region since 2001, the paper seeks to place this armed conflict in the context of daily life. The paper is divided into three sections, each of which originated as contemporaneous articles which were published as the conflict unfolded on the website *OpenDemocracy*. First we place the Kamarob gorge in its recent historical and contemporary contexts, considering how Tajikistan's 1992–7 civil war affected the region, focusing on the nature of political Islam in that struggle. Secondly, we address the argument that, since 1997, Islamic militancy has grown and become regionalized as part of the Taliban's struggle against coalition forces in Afghanistan. Finally, we consider the government's crackdown on Islam, which has intensified since the start of the conflict in September 2010, and the consequences of this for politics and society in the country. We argue that the armed conflict in Kamarob is best understood as a political-economic and gendered struggle between the reconstituted post-war state and a periphery region. Whilst Islam is the rallying cry of militants in the region, militant Islam itself remains weak and the potential for wider conflict in the name of 'jihad' is non-existent for the foreseeable future. However, the longer-term consequences of militant secularism on the part of the government of Tajikistan have the effect of suffocating religious expression in society and risk generating future political instability and conflict.

2. War, peace and political Islam in Kamarob, Tajikistan

Kamarob is a valley on the right bank of the river Surkhob in the Rasht valley region of the post-Soviet republic and post-conflict state of Tajikistan.² Much of the reporting of recent events has depicted Kamarob as a haven for foreign Islamic terrorists and, thus, a danger to the West. For example, 'Mullo Abdullo', a prominent Islamist commander during the civil war but not seen for ten years and thought killed by the coalition forces in Afghanistan in 2002, is repeatedly associated with violence when it occurs in the Rasht region (Camm, 2010).³ The claim that foreign terrorists take part in the fights stems from bodies found after the government's bombing of Mirzokhuja Ahmadov's house in Gharm. However, Ahmadov quickly changed sides to support the government against the commander Ali Bedak. Moreover, local people claim that these were Kyrgyz workers who were building his house. Kyrgyz from Djirgatol have been working on Gharmi construction sites for many years. It is claimed that these Kyrgyz were among the victims of the recent military attacks and falsely identified as international terrorists. It seems that very few of those killed or captured by government forces held foreign passports and many of these were Tajiks with Russian passports.

This exaggeration of the international dimension of the Kamarob conflict also indicates a flawed understanding of the civil war in Tajikistan, largely a conflict between regional factions in the aftermath of sudden Soviet decolonization.

Better explanations are found in careful attention to the social injustices and political rivalries that have continued, but been transformed, since the civil war. As late as 2002, helicopters crossed the valley searching for suspects, although the peace agreement had long been signed. From September to December 2010 once again dozens of helicopters and army vehicles entered the gorge in search of militant groups that are thought to hide somewhere in the mountainous terrain.

² For an overview of the conflict and peace process see Abdullaev and Barnes (2001), Atkin (2001), and Heathershaw (2009: ch.2).

³ In April 2011, the Tajikistani government finally declared Abdullo dead, more than nine years after he had first been declared dead in Afghanistan. The 'after-life' of Abdullo has served political purposes for the government of Tajikistan that warrant further academic attention.



A VILLAGE IN THE KAMAROB GORGE, TAJIKISTAN (PHOTO: S. ROCHE)

The war-time political division between the state and the opposition thus remains inscribed in the geography of the country. Rasht remains the area of ‘the opposition’, despite the fact that the vast majority of its inhabitants refused to take any part in the violence. The social and historical contexts of the conflict in Kamarob are complex. The residents of Kamarob struggle to survive; they are caught between activists who push forward an Islamic cause and state agents who collectively punish people for those attempts. The lines of conflict, however, are found less between families or lineages – as a ‘clan’-based analysis might suggest – than between those of different generations, educational backgrounds and genders.

Moreover, what is taking place in Kamarob specifically, and in Rasht as a whole, is not, as has been claimed by the Government of Tajikistan, a conflict with foreign terrorists, e.g. the

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, representing regional Islamism.⁴ Rather it is a local conflict between the regime and former commanders, who were incorporated into the state following the peace agreement, but now find themselves excluded from it once more.



THE KAMAROB GORGE, TAJIKISTAN (PHOTO: S. ROCHE)

The mujohid group of Alovuddin Davlatov (Ali Bedak), which launched the 19 September 2010 attack on the convoy, was formed during the civil war. Having retained its ties during the post-war period it was reactivated by Davlatov during the autumn of 2010. The Rasht region remains the home of opposition figures and ex-commanders from the civil war, including the influential and duplicitous Mirzokhuja Ahmadov. Such ex-commanders are often willing to cooperate with the state, as long as their own economic and, in some cases, political positions are not threatened. Opposition factions operate largely autonomously, but collaboratively. Conflicts, such as the one that erupted in September, have occurred when the

⁴ CDI Terrorism Project, 'In the Spotlight: Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)', 25 March 2002, available at: <http://www.cdi.org/terrorism/imu.cfm>, last accessed: 19 April 2011

Dushanbe government attempts to push them aside. However, there is no evidence that the oppositional and legal Islamic Revival Party (IRP)⁵ consented to the actions of Davlatov and Ahmadov. Indeed, their actions harmed its public position and the party's leader Muhiddin Kabiri has publically and repeatedly distanced the party from these activities.

The civil war escalated from political conflict and demonstrations in Dushanbe in 1991 and 1992. From these demonstrations the armed conflict spread across the country. State troops entered the Rasht valley much later to hunt down opposition commanders who had re-entered the country in 1993 after having fled the advances of government troops to seek refuge in Afghanistan in late-1992. Before 1993, Rasht residents had hosted refugees from war-torn districts; subsequently they became victims of the violence themselves. The population fled to the nearby mountains and villages to escape both the mujohids and the government troops. The former would recruit men as fighters, whilst the latter would persecute families for their collaboration. It was a hard time for the local population. Women in Shahrighul had to go far to find flour or bread and the area was isolated as a collective punishment. Meanwhile little international assistance was permitted and residents were near starvation.

A general peace agreement was signed in 1997, but it was only the beginning of a process of incorporating some commanders into the state security services (Nourzhanov 2005, Torjesen et al 2005). Others were hunted down and eradicated (Torjesen and MacFarlane 2007, Heathershaw 2009). The last local mujohid was thought to be wiped out in 2002. The war may have ended, but the post-war consolidation process has spawned occasional violent political conflicts. Since the early 2000s, many of the commanders who were incorporated into the state have been targeted, prosecuted or killed by the regime. Over this time, government forces have judiciously ascertained when and where to take action and have been able to suppress local resistance quickly. In eradicating their political rivals, the regime has also been able to seize control of their assets and business interests.

⁵ For more information on the role of the IRP during the civil war see Olimova and Olimov (2001).

In 2002, one of the authors was taken to a lovely place far inside the Kamarob gorge, where a small river descended from the mountains. Further up the gorge had been the camps of the mujohids, but it had become a place for bringing guests. By 2003 it was closed to ordinary people for the construction of a presidential dacha – freely ‘offered’ by the people, I was told. Whenever political guests were brought to this place, the population was forced to demonstrate its generosity by ‘obligatory donations’ of food and money to host the guests. This was not always easy for the many households struggling to survive.

Resentment of the regime continued, occasionally erupting violently into public life. A woman from Shahrigul took up work as a teacher because her husband had been killed during the civil war and she had to feed her children. She engaged politically and agreed to accompany a woman who had been part of a government delegation from Dushanbe. She paid for this with her life. In November 2002 she was violently beaten up as she was leaving the school. She died soon afterwards. Although it happened in the middle of the day, no evidence was found. Men do not break ranks, which makes local women very suspicious. This incident was an effective warning for the whole female population of the region. This was the most radical expression of the mujohid presence in the region. At the same time most former mujohids had integrated into village life, working as farmers, military personnel, teacher or officials.

From the early 2000s, international aid to the Rasht valley expanded dramatically. Community-based organizations were established in villages: for a few years women in Shahrigul were even allowed to work in a sewing factory funded by international organizations. One young man was very enthusiastic about developing the village and managed to get international aid to repair a road and a small electricity sub-station. But this man had many relatives to satisfy. He closed down the sewing factory so as to provide his brother with somewhere to live. International aid was regularly diverted to allow him or other leaders to profit personally and collectively, to the chagrin of the women who have little scope for responding to such activities.

In such circumstances international aid has made little difference to the contours of economic and social life in Kamarob. Every household keeps some animals for dairy produce and in their yard they plant vegetables and fruit trees. These will later be sold to Dushanbe's markets and are one of the main sources of cash income. Much of the agricultural land has already been apportioned and cultivated in the faulty 'land reforms' of the last decade; only the steep slopes remain open to new cultivation. Young people do not want to work there, as the harvest is dependent on the weather and offers poor yields. Instead, villages almost completely depend on labour migration, international aid and the meagre handouts of state institutions. The Gharmi people were one of the first to go to Russia. They are said to occupy rather good positions, although the market in Russia is anything but stable for migrants.

In Shahrigul, kinship ties are important and one of the strongest resources. Life choices and roles are decided within the family. If one brother becomes the 'family's mullah', another may migrate to earn cash for the family, whilst a third, 'educated brother' studies in Dushanbe for a secular, university education. If one brother enthusiastically engages with Islam, this is not because he has been radicalized by his family, or for economic reasons. He cannot do this without support from his family, who may not agree with his views. As such, Islamic political action has complex roots, which do not indicate widespread militancy.

3. Questioning the causes of 'Islamic militancy'

In Kamarob, Islamic education is central to every person, whether man or woman. Most young people have received a basic religious education, which consists of learning the Arabic alphabet and reading the basics of Hanafi law. An increased number of educated scholars are emerging from the region, participating in competitions and conducting religious gatherings. The Friday sermon of the central mosque in the regional centre of Gharm is relayed to the surrounding villages of Kamarob and the wider Rasht valley. The central and village mosques of Rasht have been built entirely by donations from the population. Migrants are the most important actors in promoting Islam, not as an ideology but through their material support. They will bring a gift to the mosque after a successful stay in Russia in the form of a meal, building materials or money. Many villages by now have wonderful mosques that can host several hundred people. These are entirely financed by migrants.

However, such gifts affect only the public sphere of men. This public sphere has been 'Islamized' as villagers have begun to build a two-metre high stone wall to make sure that women are kept safe from any stranger's view. This is one of various gendering activities under the banner of Islam. For instance, sisters are taken out of school at their brother's request. Women laugh and joke at weddings and other occasions, trying to make the best of their often difficult situation. Many young migrants opt for weddings at which there is a female dancer, alcohol and loud music. Others Islamize the weddings of their children. Dependent on male relatives, women have adopted coping strategies to keep the peace.

But this general Islamicization of society does not necessarily lead to higher standards of Islamic education. Local women distinguish between men who use Islam to claim masculine power over women on the one hand and well educated religious authorities on the other. Most young men who joined the mujohid groups during the war were not well-educated in Islam, but simply recruited to fight alongside their kin and neighbours. The so-called mujohidi islom were those fighters who operated against the government during the civil war. Some groups – and this includes the remilitarized group of Ali – pray regularly and insist on proper behaviour. Other groups formed during the war made use of drugs and 'lack moral codes' in the eyes of a fighter from Ali's group. There are a variety of such formations which continue to operate under the banner of Islam. However, few remain militarized and few may be considered Islamist.

Despite their differences of conviction and practice, these mujohidi groups cooperated during the civil war against the common enemy of pro-governmental militias and troops. Shahrigul provided fighters, although many mothers went to the mountains to bring back sons who had run away to join the mujohids. These young men joined the group of Ali, who is said to control Kamarob. As a rather large group, Ali's group was well-organized and disciplined. The few women members were either wives or sisters. Besides local residents, during the civil war the group also included refugees who had been chased away from the regions of the south and even some foreigners. According to its members, Ali was a fair person, very strict in keeping discipline amongst his fighters and demanding conduct in keeping with his

understanding of Islam. For many he became like a father with authority far beyond military matters.

Whilst women were subjected to increased control, the mujohid groups in Kamarob reduced the armed conflict and allowed development in the region. One village network not only created a bus transfer to Gharm, but also organized leisure time activities for youth, protecting and helping them in case of need. Thus the network of this group continues to exist, providing support for one another in times of need. The loyalty to the leader was such that former fighters agreed that they would go back to the mountains if their leaders should call them. This does not mean that they were waiting for another opportunity to fight. More that they felt they had laid down weapons collectively and voluntarily, rather than been defeated. Such fighters feel dishonoured and threatened when government troops enter Kamarob for conscription and security purposes. Such exercises of central power challenge local people's sense of sovereignty.

Following the peace agreement, former fighters were reintegrated into government organs. In this way some groups and individuals remained armed and in power. In fact when the female teacher was killed in 2002 such factionalism became visible again: the head of Gharm district (the raisi hukumat), who was a foreigner to the region, appointed by the President, was unable to govern. This faction not only sought to provide security but also to enforce what it deemed proper Islamic moral rules. Women who misbehaved were punished. Unusually for Tajikistan, a ban on the free circulation of alcohol and cigarettes was introduced. The former commanding structure of the Rasht region was headed by Mirzokhuja Nizomov who after the civil war worked in customary department and later in border committee. Whilst Ahmadov remained a powerful broker who could play both sides, Nizomov increasingly turned into a state agent losing much of his previous authority over the various armed groups.⁶

⁶ He fled the region during the Rasht events, which made people to assume that he was one of the main informant for the state. He was denied refuge to Russia and is apparently in Dushanbe right now.

Thus, the rapprochement between the central government and the mujohids was contingent on a mutual understanding of lines that could not be crossed. In recent years, however, multiple sources of tension have become clear. Government attempts to arrest Ahmadov in 2008 were taken as a challenge by the former mujohids and led to the death of a senior commander, Oleg Zakarchenko, in a shoot-out in Garm. If Ahmadov's men lost their positions, they would lose their status and income – reason enough to act politically and militarily. A further underlying reason for the conflict may lie in the natural resources that were found in Hoid, a village some way further up the valley from Gharm. Several years ago coal was found here and sold solely to people from the region. The Government of Tajikistan, in constant need of energy, identified the coal as a national resource. However, the area was controlled by mujohids who made it very difficult for the government to control the area. A final source of tension between the state and the region was compulsory military service. This has become a torment for young men who face great hardships including food shortage, heavy beatings and disease during their two-year service. Many young men come back 'unable to marry' due to illness and injury. This has caused increasing resistance. To avoid service, young men are sent to Russia which, as one villager remarked, is a 'hard school as well but at least they earn some money and come back mature'.

On Sunday, 19 September 2010, a group of mujohids led by Davlatov ambushed a military vehicle in Kamarob, killing more than 20 soldiers and officers.⁷ The soldiers had been sent to capture some of the 25 criminals who had escaped from a Dushanbe prison in late August. Eight of them had already been killed, some have been captured and forced to denounce their relatives as 'terrorists' whilst others remain at large. It is likely that it did not take more than few hours to bring the former network of mujohids together and to reorganize them for a successful attack on the military convoy. Local residents report that young men leave to join the mujohids every day the armed conflict goes on. Villages once again resembled what they were like 'during the war' an informant claimed – emptied of men. Only women, children and the elderly remained.

⁷ Ferghana News, 'Tajikistan: The soldiers of the Defense Ministry are killed in the Rasht valley', 20 September 2010, available at: <http://enews.ferghananews.com/news.php?id=1857>, accessed: 20 April 2011

Since 19 September, residents report that thousands of troops – perhaps more than 10,000 – have entered the Rasht valley. Further casualties have been sustained on both sides. Whilst figures for mujohid deaths and injuries are unknown, at least five were killed in an attack on Ahmadov's home. A much larger number have been killed as the mujohid groups were suppressed in ongoing violence over the winter which eventually led to the capture and execution of Davlatov. Among the government troops killed were conscripts of no more than 18 or 19 years old. They barely knew how to handle weapons when they were sent to capture well-trained and experienced mujohid fighters. The slogan that 'Rakhmon's army is an army of peasants' seems to have proved true – boys of poor families unable to send their sons for work overseas or to hide them from forced conscription faced hardened fighters and their new recruits. On 6 October, a military helicopter crashed with the loss of 26 national guardsmen and special operations soldiers. Although the crash was officially declared an accident, local residents report that it was caused by mujohid fire. The unambiguous truth is impossible to ascertain and may never come out.

However, one of the consequences of the renewed violence is once more to disrupt the social order in Kamarob. There is no neutrality in this conflict – at least not for young men. Women in the region generally condemn any side, whether mujohids or state military actors, and this is also true for elderly men. By contrast, young men often feel bound to take sides in defence of their family and village reputation. The fighting created an atmosphere where all residents of Kamarob are suspected of collusion, and all men considered potentially criminals, Islamists or terrorists. This galvanizes the militants. One informant claims that fathers have taken their sons to join the mujohids or to hide in a cave to escape a military raid on their village. Young people from the region are seen as a potential threat to the regime, so they become objects of government control. Informants say that, on hearing the news of military activities in the region, some students from Dushanbe resolved to join the mujohids. Local youths have long ago either joined them or left for Russia.

In sharp contrast to this narrative of local resistance to governmental control, the Tajik information agency claims that foreign forces are fighting on Tajik soil and that the military operation is a struggle against international terrorism. Some foreigners probably did fight in

Ali's group during the civil war, but it is unlikely that many of the combatants in the recent violence were foreign citizens or fighting for regional Islamist causes. Meanwhile people take their information from informal sources as the official version is deemed misleading. Instead of discussing the conflict, state television reported the future development promised by Chinese road building and shows videos taken some time ago to demonstrate that all is calm in Rasht. Rumours continued to abound of people killed, rapes by state soldiers and houses bombed, increasing anger among both sides instead of clarifying anything.

The conflict in Kamarob was not part of a national uprising against the state nor of a regional Islamist struggle. The evidence indicates that local commanders in Rasht acted autonomously against the government as they felt threatened by the further incursion of the Dushanbe government into their region. The political opposition in Dushanbe neither agreed with, nor supported the conflict. The armed conflict in Rasht is not an attack by foreign Islamic terrorists. It was prompted by an ill-equipped government response to a jail-break in Dushanbe and is a military struggle against state forces by local 'mujohids' and their young male recruits. These new recruits have emerged from decades of social and political marginalization. These exclusions must be addressed if conflict is to be resolved and further violence avoided.

4. The campaign against Islam and the consequences of the conflict

On 4 January 2011, official and local sources confirmed that Government forces had killed Davlatov⁸, the commander accused of having launched the attack, and the remnants of his groups. This event brought to an end the military conflict between the Government and the self-styled 'mujohids' led by Davlatov and other former civil war commanders. However, the conflict itself, which has led to around 100 deaths, has had far wider repercussions that go beyond the terrible violence of Rasht.

In the months since the conflict began, the military strategy has been accompanied by a campaign against 'unofficial' Islam in the country: at a level unseen since the 1992–7 civil

⁸ Fergana News, 'Tajikistan: Warlord Ali Bedaki is killed by special services', 5 January 2011, available at: <http://enews.fergananews.com/news.php?id=1969&mode=snews>, last accessed: 20 April 2011

war, when more than 100,000 people were killed or perished. While the international community continues to worry about terrorists, local people face arbitrary policies where religious practices that were permitted at one point are now forbidden. This unpredictability creates an environment of insecurity and fear, and the grounds for some young people to turn to religion for justifications for their violent resistance. The conflict in the Rasht valley was not directly caused by militant Islamist sentiment. However, the government's response to the violence has the potential to 'radicalize' some Muslims, not just because of the nature of the military campaign in the Rasht valley, but as a consequence of repressive state policies against Islamic education and the legal and moderate Islamic Revival Party. In this final section we wish to discuss the causes and effects of the recent anti-Islamic policies. What is the context of the recent wave of anti-Islamic policy? What does this mean to people and how has their life changed?

The conflict in Rasht seems to show that militant Islam has few followers in contemporary Tajikistan. Far fewer young men than were originally assumed joined the mujohid groups, despite the calls to resist the state in the name of Islam. Ahmadov, in particular, is a complex figure who appears to be loyal to no cause, whether Islamist or otherwise, other than his own personal survival and status. Students from Rasht continued their studies in Dushanbe, deeply affected by the situation back home, but with no rush to join the struggle. The story of Firuz, a teenager from Rasht studying Islam with a mullah in Hisor, is in many ways a typical one. He has seen his studies interrupted by the conflict, but he did not want to join the mujohids. He is more interested in the theological aspect of Islam than in military and political discussions. 'Islam in Tajikistan is like a wave, it comes and goes, sometimes it is strongly forbidden, sometimes openly practiced. We wait, as this is what Islam tells us to do', he declares.

In the villages of Rasht, support for the uprising was also minimal. Although some individuals joined the mujohid groups, only two to three people per village left for the mountains. Moreover, the declarations of both the militants and state officials that the rebellion is supported by the Taliban and global Islamist groups is one that must be critically assessed. What is true is that the mujohids did call for help and do have links to a world-wide net-

work, but the conflict is not (yet) of global or even regional significance. Earlier declarations of Jihad by single individuals did not lead to a large-scale participation.

Since October 2010, government action has seen the military and security services gradually reassert control in the area. Across Rasht, young men have been taken away by the secret services and held incommunicado. Roche was told of a case in which a young man disappeared and was held for several days without his parents being informed. Many have left the region to escape these 'sweeping-up' operations. But these operations in Rasht must be seen as part of a wider campaign against Islam in Tajikistan which stands in contrast to its policy following the country's civil war of the 1990s, which sought to promote official Islamic events and institutions for the sake of social stability and political legitimacy. During that period, an Islamic university was built and put under state control, and 2009 was declared the year of Imomi Azam (the founder of the Hanafi school, which is the largest among the four main schools in Islam, and the predominant tradition in Tajikistan). This year, however, all forms of unofficial Islam have been rejected, becoming almost synonymous with terrorism. The logic behind this sudden turn is in a political crisis where Islam is identified as the cause.

Across the country, repression against religious activities has increased significantly. Not only are bazaar stalls searched for religious video material, but traders with a beard are asked to shave and a fine has been put on women wearing the hijab. Cases have been reported in which young men with beards have had their driver's documents confiscated or been refused entrance to the airport. As the environment for public religious expression beyond state-sanctioned Hanafi Islam has become restricted, confessants of other Islamic persuasions have taken steps to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Religious activists move fast and remain watchful, knowing the risk to be arrested any time. As one young Salafi told Roche, 'I know they will arrest me sooner or later, but this doesn't bother me so much. What does worry me is the reason they might invent to imprison me, as I have never done anything bad'. Beyond this anecdotal evidence of persecution and despair, we can see three groups for which the campaign against Islam has had particularly adverse consequences.

Firstly, students of Islam have found their education impossible or extremely difficult to continue. Most mullahs have stopped their teaching programmes, leaving thousands of young motivated people insecure about their future. Islamic education may provide the most important source of teaching and knowledge in today's Tajikistan. Unlike state education, religious schools are usually free of charge and represent a much more open educational system than secular schools. (An exception is the official Islamic university, which is very expensive for average people.) At the same time, underpaid teachers, a shortage of teachers and corruption within the education system have run down most state schools so they stand as symbols of the weak state. The discrepancy between a discourse, which places high value in education, and the practice of an impoverished educational system increases every year. As a consequence of this decline, many young people have come to recognize in Islam a source of knowledge less susceptible to the corruption found in state schools and profit-making of expensive private lyceums. In fear of this expansion of religious schooling, secular and nominally Muslim state authorities have rushed to suppress opportunities for Islamic education, especially overseas. In recent weeks, hundreds of scholars studying in various Muslim countries have been called back under the pretext that they were studying in illegal religious institutions. They were portrayed as potential terrorists 'in need of special supervision' on the national TV airwaves. Recent research on Central Asian students in the Middle East has demonstrated that in fact they travel abroad for a complex mixture of reasons, many of which have nothing to do with radicalization. It is not known how many of these international students have been arrested and how many are controlled 24 hours a day. But we can certainly say that such a campaign will have ramifications. It will make people try to avoid official authorities as much as possible; potentially, it could lead to resistance.

Secondly, legal Islamic political activists have been hit. On Friday 26 November, Muhiddin Kabiri, the Chairman of the IRP, announced that the party will no longer be able to invite citizens to Friday prayer. This move followed Government demands to close down the party's mosque. Despite this, Kabiri remained steadfast in a refusal to support the mujohids. For all his moderate tones and compromise in the face of repression, the official response has been further intimidation, including public chastisement from the speaker of parliament for Kabiri's 'frequent overseas trips'. Meanwhile, while the IRP continues to retain good re-

lations with Western governments, these same governments have not spoken out against the Tajik Governments scapegoat targeting of 'unofficial' Islam and subsequent repression. The campaign against the IRP in particular has repercussions for the future of inclusive, less patriarchal modes of Islam and Islamic expression.

Thirdly, women have been particularly affected by government repression. The IRP is one of a small number of Islamic bodies that has lobbied for greater integration of women into Islamic society. The party, for example, founded a women's mosque, where women were free to discuss, learn and pray. Fifty-six per cent of IRP members are women and the party provides far more scope for female involvement than most of the official and highly patriarchal Islamic bodies and mosques in Tajikistan. This is in contrast to modern Tajikistan, where women have generally not been allowed to attend prayer in the mosque. In the capital Dushanbe, two mosques allow women to pray and have reserved a space for them, but in rural areas this is rejected completely by the majority of men. While well educated religious scholars claim that Islam does allow women to attend mosques, the majority of often poorly educated mullahs reject this idea.

The arson attack on the IRP's women's mosque, which occurred during the conflict in Kama-rob, encapsulated these three most vulnerable groups that have been affected by the state campaign against Islam. Roche had the chance to visit the IRP's women's mosque on 16 October last year. She saw more than 50 women attentively listening to a teacher, who was explaining the meaning of the Koran. Many of them were elderly women or young women who had recently completed secondary school. Many had no scope to continue higher education in a state run institution due to the ban of hijab in secular education, the high fees at the Islamic University or the lack of permission from their families. After the lesson, they sat together and discussed what they had just heard. Roche was impressed by the openness and freedom to express ideas and knowledge independent of age. It turned out that several young women were well educated and contributed substantively to the discussion. Some women have been active in women's Islamic education for more than 12 years, almost the entire period since the 1997 peace agreement. On Saturday 23 October 2010, their mosque and cultural centre was burned down. The building was new and the burning is considered

by members to be an attack on the party by unknown forces. A day before the alleged arson, the IRP building was raided by security forces interrupting Friday prayer and confiscating literature, audio and video material and computers. The very same day one of them warned that ‘more things may happen, if they did not stop prayer within the party’s building’. It is highly unlikely that the arsonist and the forces behind him will ever be found.



THE BUILDING, ADJACENT TO ISLAMIC RENAISSANCE PARTY’S HEADQUARTERS AND ITS MAIN PRAYER HALL, WAS ALMOST COMPLETELY DESTROYED BY FIRE ON THE AFTERNOON OF 23 OCTOBER 2010 (PHOTO: RFERL)

5. Conclusions

The religious education initiatives of the IRP have become a particular target of the government campaign against Islam as it intensified during the Kamarob conflict. However, attacks on the IRP have political as well as religious ramifications. Islam, in the minds of the Party’s leaders and most of its members is not a system of control but a moral base for social interaction; a way to create trust between rulers and ruled, and the basis for a proper rule of law. Some have interpreted the burning-down of the mosque as a political fight between the government and the opposition. However, the burning of the mosque is much more than a primitive form of political struggle – it has stifled the gradual emergence of a female religious elite. For the women, the burning of the mosque once again demonstrates a pa-

triarchal society that claims Islam to be the domain of men alone. For men, and particularly young men, the attack on their opportunities for religious education and expression seems to confirm the critique of the secular state which is advanced by their more militant friends and teachers. The Government of Tajikistan, under the influence of militant secularism and the imperative of regime security, fails to understand the durability of Islam as a social and political critique of government corruption and the inequalities and perceived immoralities generated by market forces.

The long-term ramifications of this divide between a religiously observant society and a state class which arbitrarily and instrumentally uses and abuses Islam are quite profound. The repression of the IRP undermines the one outlet for public expression of political Islam in Tajikistan. The military conflict in Rasht may now have ended. But it cannot and should not be fully explained in terms of militant Islam. It has complex roots in Tajikistan's political and economic struggles. What is more, the Government's response to the conflict may increase the likelihood of outbreaks of Islamic militancy in the longer term.

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