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Growing Extremism Threatens Fragile Tajikistan

By Josh Cohen

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With the media's terrorism coverage largely focused on the fight against the Islamic State in Syria, a new front line against Islamic militancy may be forming in Central Asia. In small and mountainous Tajikistan fears of extremism are rising.

A gun battle near Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe killed 17 people on Sept. 4 as government troops and forces loyal to a former Islamic opposition commander traded gunfire. The Tajik government blamed a "terrorist group" led by Deputy Defense Minister Abduhalim Nazarzoda and claimed he was a member of the recently banned Islamic Renaissance Party. While Nazarzoda was eventually killed in a gun battle nearly two weeks later, the incident again highlighted the risk that extremism could spread from the Middle East and Afghanistan into Central Asia.

Other worrying incidents highlighting the risks to Tajikistan have also occurred. In a move that shocked the government, the head of the head of the police special forces branch Gulmurod Khalimov abruptly disappeared, turning up days later in a video announcing he had

joined the Islamic state. In his video, Khalimov termed Tajikistan's president and interior minister "dogs" and promised to "come for the government with slaughter."

The defection of Tajikistan's ex-special forces chief is only one sign of the small but growing Tajik presence within the Islamic State. In another video earlier this year, a number of Tajiks — including a leading radical Islamist named Nusrat Nazarov — threatened the government, announcing that their next video might be "from the mountains of Tavildara in central Tajikistan, or the Tajik capital, Dushanbe."

By most accounts there are somewhere between 300 and 500 Tajik citizens fighting with the Islamic State. With Tajiks reportedly able to earn $3,000 or more a month fighting with the Islamic State, it is not surprising that some are tempted by this relative windfall.

The Tajik presence within the Islamic State is certainly a legitimate concern for Dushanbe, but the most immediate outside threat actually comes from northern Afghanistan.

According to a report by Ahmed Rashid in The New York Times, Tajik intelligence believes that at least 5,000 fighters from the five ex-Soviet Central Asian republics have joined up with several thousand Afghan and Pakistani Taliban members in northern Afghanistan. If there is a near-term militant threat to Tajikistan, it will originate from northern Afghanistan.

While Tajikistan is right to be concerned about the threat to its stability from Islamic militants, the Tajik government exacerbates this threat with its foolhardy domestic policies toward Islam — policies which are arguably a greater threat to Tajikistan's stability than the militant threat from outside the country.

As with President Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan, President Emomali Rakhmon tends to see threats of Islamic radicalism even where none exist. As a result, Rakhmon takes a hard line toward even mild forms of piety, which is actually more likely to promote militancy than contain it.

A prime example of this is the government's so-called war on clothing. The Tajik government has targeted men with beards and women who dress more conservatively, as well as Islamic studies in school and even the call to prayer. The majority of Tajikistan's citizens are Sufis, which is a moderate form of Islam. However, the government's repressive policies inevitably boomerang against it, and actually promote radicalism rather than containing it. As a result, some Tajiks respond by joining militants in Afghanistan or even Syria.

This backlash is not surprising. As we have seen in numerous countries in the Middle East, when secular but authoritarian governments attempt to drive Islam underground, it inevitably backfires. The end result is either violence or, as with Iran in 1979, a full-scale revolution. Unfortunately, Tajikistan's government does not seem to have learned this lesson very well.

In addition, the country's governance further exacerbates the trend toward radicalization. President Emomali Rakhmon has ruled for more than two decades, and shows no signs of stepping down. According to Stephen Blank, an expert on Russian foreign policy at the American Foreign Policy Council, the countries of Central Asia are marked by "illegitimate governance," which is a prime contributor to internal instability.

Tajikistan's poverty — the average monthly salary is barely $170 per month — also contributes to this mix. The end result is a toxic brew of unnecessary repression, authoritarianism and poverty.

How can the threat of militancy in Tajikistan be contained? One thing the West could do is pressure the Rakhmon government to ease up on its repressive policies toward Islam. Human rights discussions are never well received by authoritarian governments, every effort must be made to help the Rakhmon government understand the link between repression and militancy.

Tajikistan also desperately needs more economic aid as well as investment in infrastructure. Tajikistan's potential in hydroelectric power is a prime example of a sector that would benefit from outside investment via an entity like the World Bank.

More broadly, promoting economic stabilization in Tajikistan would be a prime area for cooperation between the West, Russia and even China. The United States is understandably eager to depart Central Asia, but having expended prodigious amounts of blood and money in Afghanistan, the last thing Washington should do is ignore the risk of another failed state emerging in the region.

The threat of a collapse in Tajikistan certainly exists, but it is still not too late for the Tajik government and outside powers to stop this from occurring.

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