

Taming Tajikistan's Eastern Valleys

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After local power-broker dies in firefight, experts say key is to ensure that counter-insurgency drive does not cause further upset.

Nearly two weeks after a former rebel commander was killed in a firefight, officials say stability is returning to the eastern valleys of Tajikistan and any remaining armed militants are being hunted down.

Analysts say that to prevent the ongoing sweep from creating a backlash among local communities, the security forces will need to tread lightly and avoid needlessly harassing villagers.

Interior Minister Abdurahim Kakhkharov told a July 22 press conference that the Tavildara valley, the scene of several recent clashes, was now stable.

In the Rasht valley, which runs north of and roughly parallel to Tavildara, the minister said efforts were under way to find the three or four remaining members of an armed group that had appeared there in recent months and had largely been eliminated.

Since May, the two valleys have seen sporadic firefights between government security forces and groups of armed men who appear – in the absence of firm information – to be a mix of local Tajiks and incomers. The authorities believe they are Islamic radicals who have been involved in the thriving drugs trade.

MAJOR FIGURE SWITCHES SIDES FOR REASONS UNEXPLAINED

Matters came to a head on July 11 with the death of Mirzo Ziyu, an influential figure who was commander-in-chief of the opposition guerrilla force in the civil war of the Nineties but later joined the government.

The interior ministry and the State Committee for National Security, GKNB put out a joint statement on July saying Ziyu had allied himself with drug-smuggling gangs in Tavildara, but agreed to cooperate with the authorities after he was captured on July 11.

When he agreed later that day to join police in an effort to negotiate with the militants, the latter shot him dead and wounded a number of policemen, the statement said.

Mirzo Ziyu commanded the guerrillas of the United Tajik Opposition, UTO, which fought against government forces in the 1992-97 war. The UTO's main component was the Islamic Rebirth Party, and the conflict was often portrayed as pitting Islamist fundamentalists against former Communists. But the divisions also ran along ethnic lines, with the UTO maintaining much of its power base in the eastern high-mountain valleys.

The landmark peace deal of 1997 saw UTO combatants disarmed and senior members assigned posts in government. Mirzo Ziyu was made a lieutenant-general and appointed minister for emergencies, a disaster relief agency with its own quasi-military troops, some of them ex-UTO.

The chain of events leading from his removal as minister in 2006 and his decision in late June to join armed bands roaming the mountain sides – according to the official version of events – is hard to explain.

“Mirzo Ziyu was the unofficial leader in Tavildara,” explained political scientist Abdughani Mamadazimov, who heads the Association of Political Scientists of Tajikistan. “In recent years he'd moved away from an active role in the capital and relocated to the district centre.

“But his past wouldn't leave him alone. I have no hard information suggesting he was involved in the illicit drugs trade..., but as informal leader he would nevertheless have been aware that narcotics were moving out of Afghanistan via this inaccessible region to the north and further afield.”

The interior ministry/GKNB statement alleged that Ziyu was involved in a drug trafficking ring set up to fund terrorism. The organisation, it said, was led by one Nemat Azizov, who the statement said was an active member of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU, an outlawed group which launched raids into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2000. In recent years, the group has been based in northwestern Pakistan, allied with the Taleban and al-Qaeda.

Interviewed by IWPR in late May, Ziyu complained of mounting harassment by the police.

“Police sergeants began checking my ID at checkpoints for no reason,” he said. “This was an insult and I felt humiliated, but I did not offer any resistance. I sensed these incidents were being set up deliberately, and I didn't want it to be me that started something.”

MILITANTS IN THE MOUNTAINS

Reports of clashes emerged in May shortly after media reports that another UTO commander called Mullo Abdullo had resurfaced in Tavildara after a long spell away in Afghanistan or Pakistan, and was trying to recruit local men to his small band. (For a full report on this, and subsequent clashes, see **Chasing Phantoms in the Tajik Mountains**, RCA No. 581, 24-Jun-09.)

A senior interior ministry official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told IWPR that “Mullo Abdullo also met former emergencies minister Mirzo Ziyu, who was reluctant to go for the idea of offering armed resistance to the regime.”

Initially, the authorities insisted that troops were engaged exclusively in a counter-narcotics drive in the valley. Their suggestion that drugs were being grown in Tavildara may have been hard to credit since the climate is unsuitable for opium and marijuana cultivation, but Tajikistan is indisputably a well-worn trafficking route for Afghan heroin heading towards Russia and the rest of Europe.

The identity of the armed group or groups that security forces encountered in the Rasht and Tavildara valleys in May and June remains unclear.

From the various accounts, the picture is of returning civil war-era guerrillas who may have teamed up with local ex-UTO men who are disgruntled with central government.

Then there is the alleged IMU connection, which is possible if the likes of Mullo Abdullo have spent time in Pakistan’s frontier provinces, and also because the IMU’s Uzbek fighters fought alongside Tajiks in the UTO. Finally, the Tajik interior ministry says five Russian nationals who it claims were also part of the trafficking network were killed in a firefight on July 16. Another five Russian citizens – all of them Chechens – had earlier been arrested on suspicion of belonging to the group.

According to another interior ministry source, the authorities were aware of groups coming in from Afghanistan as long ago as last winter, but “didn’t assign much significance to them” as “militants occasionally turn up from the neighbouring state [Afghanistan] as Rasht is only loosely under government control”. He said the security operation, under the guise of an anti-opium sweep, was put together in a hurry once officials got wind that there were now some 20 or 25 men in the area.

More troops were sent in after a soldier was killed and three more taken hostage in early May. But according to this source, they did not just engage in a pursuit operation, but also held indirect negotiations with the group’s leader Nemat Azizov, via his relatives.

“But on June 25 Azizov and Malysh [another group member] went to see Ziyu in the village of Agba and they persuaded him to join their band,” said the official.

By the time the interior ministry and GKNB issued their July 12 statement, they had to acknowledge that this was more than a routine anti-narcotics sweep and they identified Azizov as an IMU member engaged in an international drug trafficking.

NO TURNING BACK

According to a former GKNB officer who spoke to IWPR on condition of anonymity, it was inevitable that Ziyu’s decision to switch sides to the outlaws would cost him dear.

“Political scientists call these people warlords. They play a positive role as long as they’re engaged in military operations, but they find it impossible to reintegrate into civilian life,” he said. “In peacetime, the government gradually begins cutting away at their influence – and it does so to its own former allies as well as to its opponents. We see clearly that this is the case with the Tajik government – it has taken virtually all the influential players from the civil war out of circulation.”

Political analyst Rashid Ghani Abdullo agrees that the former rebel turned government minister was finished the moment he aligned himself with a faction that thought it could oppose the central authorities by military means, potentially sparking renewed conflict in Tajikistan.

“This showed that the authorities were right to suspect that some of the former armed opposition do not subscribe to peace and stability,” said Abdullo, “and also that certain individuals who have a problem with the government are prepared to destabilise the political and security situation for their own ends.”

In Abdullo’s view, Tajik society would not stomach a resumption in warfare.

“The generation that might back an opponent of the current regime has yet to emerge. And those who’d realistically be in a position to do so now remember the experience of the recent war and have no wish to enter into a confrontation with the authorities just to further the personal interests of certain individuals who are unhappy about losing their jobs in the state system and finding themselves on the outside of the decision-making process,” he said.

TIME FOR A SOFTLY, SOFTLY APPROACH TO CALM NERVOUS COMMUNITIES

Mamadzimov worries that taking Mirzo Ziyov out of the equation could have a destabilising effect in the eastern mountains. He argues that however ambivalent a figure Ziyov might have been, he was someone the central authorities could at least have done business with as they tried to govern this area.

“Now he’s gone, and the [political] group that was loyal to him has disintegrated. That may negatively impact on stability in this important part of the country,” he said.

Mirzo Ziyov’s death has been a difficult issue for the IRP to handle, given that he was the UTO’s top commander in the civil war. Now a legal party planning to contest next year’s parliamentary election, the Islamic party has little desire to be identified with the armed militants still up in the hills.

In a July 18 statement, the party spoke of “transnational illegal groups” fomenting instability in the region. It urged the government and other political forces alike to make concerted efforts to achieve peace and dialogue.

In a clear hint at concerns that government forces might use excessive force in Tavildara, the IRP said “experience has shown that the use of military force, even within the bounds of the law, is ineffective in Tajikistan”.

Interviewed by IWPR last month, an influential local figure reflected local perceptions that police were picking out anyone “whose outward appearance is Islamic”, rather than known suspected militants, for detailed ID checks.

The ex-GKNC officer who spoke to IWPR said the task now was to ensure that ongoing security operations were not perceived as harassment by the local population.

“If government forces are able to learn the lessons from earlier years of military conflict, and prevent excesses taking place as they investigate the Tavildara confrontation, it might lead to these [mountain] districts finally coming back under government control.”

“The government will gradually resume control over these mountainous regions, and the former UTO commanders can either live out their days in their private houses on the unspoken condition that they don’t meddle in this process, or else they’ll get squashed or eliminated.”

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