



# Conflict in Tajikistan - not really about radical Islam

Sophie Roche, 19th October 2010

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For almost a month, an armed conflict has been raging in the mountains of the Kamarob gorge between the forces of the Government of Tajikistan and local 'mujohids'. This is the most serious political violence in Tajikistan for ten years. Here, in the first of a two-part article, Sophie Roche and John Heathershaw draw on ethnographic research and contacts with residents of the region to explain the legacy of the civil war and the social and political contexts of this largely unreported conflict.

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**Summary:** For almost a month, an armed conflict has been raging in the mountains of the Kamarob gorge between the forces of the Government of Tajikistan and local 'mujohids'. This is the most serious political violence in Tajikistan for ten years. Here, in the first of a two-part article, Sophie Roche and John Heathershaw draw on ethnographic research and contacts with residents of the region to explain the legacy of the civil war and the social and political contexts of this largely unreported conflict.

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](#) [13] and 26 of the government troops - many of them young, poorly-trained conscripts - were shot and killed. The incident drew momentary international attention to the mountainous region in the east of the country. The government has set up an information blackout. It has issued threatening statements against Tajikistan's beleaguered independent press and threatened criminal charges against journalists who report more than the official line.



Reports claim that the Tajikistan highland of Karategin is a hotbed of radical Islam, but locals doubt how much this is really a conflict between foreign terrorists © Gennadiy Ratushenko / World Bank

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's 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.

The first reports of journalists who went to the area claim that all the young men have vanished from sight: many have headed to the mountains to flee government reprisals or join the rebels. Accounts of residents suggest that there have been many more casualties with several turning up injured everyday in the military hospital. Thirteen years after Tajikistan's general peace agreement, which ended its post-Soviet [civil war](#) [14], how and why has conflict erupted again in Kamarob?

We will attempt to provide some answers to this question by focusing 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. A first visit to this village will amaze the visitor with its table cloth (dastarkhon) overloaded with dishes, breads and sweets and lovely people who would do anything to help the guest to feel at home. 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 characterise the new conflict which has broken out in Kamarob in 2010.

### **The phantom of foreign Islamism**

Kamarob is a valley on the right bank of the river Surkhob. It follows another river, the Sorbog, which



brings clean water from the high mountains. On both sides of this torrent we find little villages that squeeze between the river and the slopes of the mountains. The houses are built of mud and on sunny days shade is afforded by poplar trees. The winters are cold and the summers agreeable.

Much of the reporting of recent events has depicted Kamarob as a place full of foreign Islamic terrorists and, thus, a danger to the West. 'Mullo Abdullo', not seen for ten years and thought killed by the coalition forces in Afghanistan in 2002, is repeatedly [associated](#) [15] with violence when it occurs in the Rasht region. Media coverage simply [reinforces](#) [16] this perception.

The claim that foreign terrorists take part in the fights stems from bodies found after the government's bombing of Ahmadov's house in Gharm. However, 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.

This misreporting also indicates a flawed understanding of the civil war in Tajikistan. It fails to understand that the violence was promoted by the Tajik government, which is unwilling to admit to the local aspects of the conflict, as they implicate the government itself in the causes of the violence.



(c) S Roche

**"The residents of Kamarob struggle to survive; they are caught between activists who push forward an Islamic cause and the state .. which collectively punishes people for**



## those attempts"

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. The same is the case now – dozens of helicopters and army vehicles enter the gorge in search of the groups that are thought to hide somewhere in the mountainous terrain.

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 majority of its inhabitants avoid conflict. Many Dushanbe residents who have never been to the region see all its residents as 'backwards' and Islamists. However, national and foreign visitors to the villages eventually recognize that people welcome foreign guests, offering extraordinarily hospitality despite their extreme poverty.

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.



The media blackout of Tajikistan has been effective, but some reports have got through (c) S Roche

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](#) [17], representing regional Islamism. 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 civil war

The mujohid group of Alovuddin Davlatov (Ali Bedak), which launched the attack on the convoy, was formed during the civil war. The fact that its structures were maintained in the post-conflict period has made it easy to reactivate in recent weeks. In fact, the Gharm region remains the home of opposition figures and ex-commanders from the civil war, including the influential Mirzokhuja Ahmadov. Such ex-commanders are often willing to cooperate, 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 Dushanbe government attempts to push them aside. However, there is no evidence that the oppositional and legal [Islamic Revival Party](#) [18](IRP) consented to the actions of Davlatov and Ahmadov. Indeed, their actions harmed its public position.

"What is taking place in Kamarob is not, as has been claimed by the Government of Tajikistan, a conflict with foreign terrorists, but a local conflict between the regime and former commanders"

The civil war escalated from political conflict and demonstrations in Dushanbe in [1991 and 1992](#). [19] From these demonstrations emerged the war that spread across the country. State troops entered the Rasht valley much later to hunt down opposition commanders. Until then 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 Shahrigul had to go far to find flour or bread and the area was isolated as a collective punishment. Meanwhile no international help was allowed in and people were near starvation.

## Peace?

The peace agreement was signed in [1997](#) [20], but it was only the beginning of a process of incorporating some commanders into the state security services. Others were hunted down and eradicated. 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. In the past, 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.

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 and the harsh patriarchal order 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 don't 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.

### **Economy and society today**

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](#)' [21] 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 Gharimi 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. So Islamic political action has complex roots, which do not indicate widespread militancy.

***Part two of this article, published tomorrow, aims to show that the conflict in Kamarob results from an inter-elite battle for control between the Dushanbe government and local commanders.***

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conducting research in the Rasht valley.

Sideboxes'**Read On' Sidebox:**

[The Tajik civil war: causes and dynamics](#) [14], by Shirin Akiner and Catherine Barnes (March 2001), Reconciliation Resources web site

[www.fergana.ru](http://www.fergana.ru) [22] (in Russian and in English)

<http://www.eurasianet.org/> [23]

[Tajikistan country profile](#) [24], BBC

[Tajikistan. Through a Caring Lens](#) [25], photo essay, 24 Sept, 2010 Mercy Corps web site

[Tajikistan page](#) [26] on Mercy Corps web site

[Tajikistan Unlikely to Be Test Case for Russia-led Security Group.](#) [27] European Dialogue XXI web site, 8 Oct., 2010

HRW [report](#) [28] on Tajikistan

**Sidebox:**

**Tajik Civil War:**

***In the early 1990s, as the forces that once held together the Soviet Union began to dissolve, political competition and conflict began to escalate in Tajikistan, the far south-eastern republic of the USSR. Shortly after independence was declared in September 1991, the struggle for state power played out more or less peacefully, albeit with frequent public demonstrations in the capital, Dushanbe. Nine presidential candidates contested the first multi-party elections, which were won by a former leader of the Communist Party. Yet a popular consensus on the legitimacy of his presidency remained elusive. Tension between supporters of the government and the opposition parties intensified to the point where different factions took up weapons. Less than a year after independence, Tajikistan was engulfed in civil war.***

***Between 20,000 and 60,000 people were killed in the first year of fighting when the war was at its peak, with most commentators judging that about 50,000 lives were lost between May and December 1992. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 600,000 people - about one-tenth of the population - were internally displaced and at least 80,000 sought refuge outside the country, mostly in Afghanistan.***

Shirin Akiner and Catherine Barnes, Reconciliation Resources

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