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TAJIKISTAN

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Promoting Religious Freedom and Countering Violent Extremism in Tajikistan

By [Jason Morton](#), Policy Analyst

Introduction

Security issues topped the agenda for then Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Alice Wells when she visited Tajikistan in January 2020. She met with top Tajikistani officials responsible for national security and border control, to whom she [emphasized](#) the importance of ongoing cooperation between Tajikistan and Afghanistan countering violent extremism and terrorism. As suggested by her choice of emphases, the specter of Islamic State (IS) militants and drug smugglers crossing the porous mountain border from the neighboring state is a perennial feature of U.S. relations with Tajikistan—and the State Department is usually quick to remind regional audiences that it is committed to preventing such spillover.

There is genuine reason for security concerns in Tajikistan. In July 2018, four cyclists from the United States, Switzerland, and the Netherlands were killed in a brutal attack for which IS subsequently [claimed responsibility](#). The militant group also claimed responsibility for two [prison riots](#) in November 2018 and May 2019, in which dozens of inmates and several guards were killed. Such incidents demonstrate that extremist groups—primarily acting in service of radical Islamist ideology—remain a serious and deadly challenge to security and safety in Tajikistan.

However, Tajikistan cannot face these real threats with brute force alone. To confront the challenge of violent extremism in an effective and sustainable way, the country should not conflate its efforts to counter extremism with a hostile approach to religion generally; rather, it should end its systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. By bifurcating the religious sphere into a space contested by state-sponsored “traditional” religion on one side and a host of so-called “extremist” faiths on the other, the Tajikistani government is only exacerbating the problem. In fact, extensive [research](#) on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) demonstrates that religious violence and acts of terrorism are not primarily motivated by exposure to religion. More often, they are linked to specific [grievances](#), especially the perception or experience of faith-based discrimination. In contrast, [studies](#) show that increased religious freedom [diminishes](#) the relative influence of radical groups by exposing individuals to a variety of messages and perspectives. Violent jihadis, for example, consistently demonstrate [low levels](#) of knowledge about actual Islamic thought and doctrine.

Effective U.S. government engagement with Tajikistan should emphasize the importance of religious freedom to sustainable security. This Issue Update documents Tajikistan's securitization of religion, demonstrating its counterproductive impact on CVE. USCIRF recommends a more effective and inclusive approach to the challenges that violent, religiously-motivated groups like IS pose—one that promotes religious freedom and educational programs about the social benefits of pluralism, while ending the cycle of grievances that current Tajikistani policy toward religion generates.

Government Control and Persecution of Islam

The authoritarian regime of Emomali Rahmon, a former Soviet apparatchik who has ruled Tajikistan since 1992, strictly controls the practice and administration of Islam, which is the dominant religion in the country. Rahmon monopolizes Tajikistani politics, allegedly receiving [91%](#) of the vote in recent elections on October 12, 2020. Since the late 2000s, his regime has also worked to [monopolize](#) the practice of Islam, promoting a “depoliticized Islam” that is itself highly politicized as “a single version of Islam to which the whole nation should adhere and that is the guarantee of national unity.” The government has effectively revived Soviet era practices and institutions that define, monitor, and regulate officially acceptable religious practice, while simultaneously working to eradicate those practices and expressions it does not directly control.

In 2009, Tajikistan passed the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Unions, which set onerous registration requirements; criminalized unregistered religious activity, private religious education, and proselytism; set strict limits on the number and size of mosques; allowed state interference with the appointment of imams and the content of sermons; required official permission for religious organizations to provide religious instruction and communicate with foreign coreligionists; and imposed state controls on the content, publication, and import of religious materials. The government also dedicated 2009 to Abu Hanifa, the founder of Hanafism, a school of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence and the official religious doctrine of Tajikistan.

The Rahmon government increasingly acted throughout the 2010s to tighten its grip on religion and delegitimize more conservative expressions of Islamic tradition. In 2010, it [reformed](#) the Islamic Council, which includes many clerics educated in Soviet-era institutions, to increase [government control](#). In a 2010 speech, President Rahmon publicly condemned parents who give their

children a religious education and insulted women who wear the hijab, referring to them as “monkeys.” In 2011, the state began to dictate the content of Friday sermons, often devoting them to praise of the Rahmon regime—a move that has prompted the resignation of numerous influential clerics, driving many of them underground. In 2011 and 2012, Tajikistan further amended its administrative and penal code to set new penalties, including large fines and prison terms for religion-related charges such as organizing or participating in “unapproved” religious meetings. Those amendments included a 2011 law on parental responsibility that banned minors from any organized religious activity except funerals. Furthermore, since 2014, the state has paid imams' salaries and required them to wear state-manufactured religious garments.

Government control over Muslim clergy has coincided with a campaign against individual expressions of piety. In 2015, a regional official [boasted](#) that over the course of the year, his authorities had identified, fingerprinted, and shaved nearly 13,000 bearded men. The government has forcibly shaved or denied passports to thousands more in subsequent years, and locals [report](#) that officials stop women in hijabs, record their personal information, and force them to wear their headscarves in the “Tajik fashion” (shortened and pulled back to reveal hair). In December 2019, Nilufar Rajabova [reported](#) that police in Dushanbe detained her and more than 20 other women and told them to go back to Iran or Afghanistan if they wanted to wear the hijab. Rajabova was eventually fined for “hooliganism.”

According to official statistics, in 2017 alone, Tajikistani authorities [closed](#) 1,938 mosques for not meeting government regulations. A concerted government campaign to reduce the number of mosques continued since then. In a December 2019 speech, President Rahmon [mimicked](#) Soviet-era anti-religious propaganda by claiming that mosques only served the interests of the “older generation,” while what the younger generation really needed was more “schools” and “medical centers.”

In January 2020, the government ordered the conversion of a popular mosque in Khujand, the nation's second-largest city, into a [movie theater](#) due to the region's relative lack of cinemas. Authorities have converted many other mosques to cafes, garment factories, and other public facilities. Those mosques that remain are frequently outfitted with security cameras that allow government surveillance of attendance and the content of sermons.

At the same time, Tajikistan is now home to the [largest mosque](#) in Central Asia: a massive structure with a capacity of up to 120,000 worshippers. The intended symbolism is clear and in accordance with official rhetoric: acceptable Islam in Tajikistan is official, centralized, and more representative of nationalism than personal belief. As Rahmon [instructed](#) the nation in 2017, citizens should not express their love of God through “alien cultures and traditions,” but in their hearts, and while simultaneously preserving the “true culture of the Tajiks.”

Fabricating “Extremism”

Tajikistan is the poorest of the former Soviet Central Asian republics, blessed with some of the world’s highest mountains but none of the oil and gas riches produced by its neighbors like Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan. Instead, it has a long, rugged border with Afghanistan, and the legacy of a five-year civil war (1992–1997) that claimed up to 100,000 lives and displaced more than a million people. Stability is tenuous in Tajikistan, and the specter of terrorism and extremism provides the Rahmon regime with capital it otherwise lacks—enabling it to both consolidate political control and solicit foreign capital for security. These dynamics do not preclude the existence of a real threat, but the government has repeatedly exaggerated, and even fabricated one, in pursuit of an authoritarian agenda.

The country’s civil war was extremely [complex](#), but it was essentially a scramble for power and resources that the breakup of the Soviet Union precipitated. It involved a clash between regional identities and elites, pitting a Soviet-era elite with power bases in the dominant industrial cities of Dushanbe and Khujand against an alliance of regional and ethnic groups from the periphery. Each side was variously supported by state actors like Russia, Uzbekistan, and Iran, as well as by non-state actors, including Islamist groups and organized crime syndicates. As the conflict progressed, the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) took on an increasingly Islamist character, but religion was never a primary cause of the violence.

The official campaign against Islam just outlined coincided with an equally robust crackdown on political opposition. After the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) gained two seats in the 2010 parliamentary elections, the [persecution](#) began in earnest. The party had been officially included in the government under the 1997 peace treaty ending the war, and long since embraced a moderate political program and eschewed violence in favor of parliamentary politics. Yet their growing popularity as the

face of the opposition, also embraced by non-religious voters, contributed to their downfall. Government [persecution](#) of the party included a series of pornographic videos, allegedly showing Muslim clerics and IRPT members engaged in illicit sex acts, that began to circulate online and in the news.

When the government finally banned the IRPT as an extremist terrorist organization in 2015, the [U.S. Embassy in Tajikistan stated](#) that it had “seen no credible evidence” of this and further noted that although Tajikistan faces real terrorist threats, it is “vitaly important to distinguish between peaceful political opposition voices and violent extremist acts.” Instead, the Rahmon regime has continued to use charges of “extremism” and terrorism to prosecute the IRPT and target all opposition to its rule.

Since then, Tajikistan has continued to crack down on religious activity, the media, and civil society—all under the dubious claim of combating extremism. Tajikistan leads the region in imprisoning journalists for extremism, terrorist links, and inciting hatred. In March 2020, the Tajikistani government officially banned the Prague-based news outlet “[Akhbor](#)”—a website founded by a former employee of RFE/RL to provide professional objective coverage largely unavailable inside Tajikistan—claiming that it was a “platform” for “extremists and terrorists.” In April 2020, a Tajikistani court [sentenced](#) the journalist Daler Sharipov to one year in prison for “inciting religious hatred.” Sharipov regularly reported on religious freedom conditions in the country, including government anti-hijab campaigns.

Since the 2015 ban, many IRPT leaders also have been imprisoned and subsequently died under suspicious circumstances. When Muhaddin Kabiri fled the country, for example, the government went after his family, refusing to let his [four-year-old grandson](#) leave Tajikistan to receive treatment for stage-4 cancer until pressured by outrage from the international community.

In addition, since January 2020, the government has detained at least 154 people it accuses of membership in the banned Muslim Brotherhood. In August, 20 of these men, who include university lecturers, students, businessmen, and at least one government official, were [sentenced](#) to between five and seven years in prison. They will enter a decrepit and overcrowded prison system that is home to both real and fabricated extremists. While it is impossible to know whether any of these men are violent extremists, it is very likely that at least some of them are convenient political targets. It is certain that

being imprisoned will put them into close contact with actual violent extremists, and potentially increase their grievances against the government.

Radicalization

When terrorists killed [four bicyclists](#) in 2018, including two Americans, the government initially blamed the IRPT until the Islamic State publicly claimed responsibility. The circumstances surrounding the attack itself remains obscure; eyewitnesses claim that all the suspects were alive when arrested, although all but one was later declared dead. The trial was closed, with the Ministry of Tourism representing the aggrieved party. In March 2020, Hussein Abdusamadov, the sole survivor of the group charged with carrying out the attack, died in prison under unknown circumstances. Authorities allegedly [suspected](#) that Abdusamadov had recruited a new cell in prison and planned a prison uprising; his body was sent for an [autopsy](#) to “exclude torture” as a cause of death. These developments illustrate the complexities related to countering radicalization in Tajikistan, particularly government actions and the deplorable prison conditions into which alleged perpetrators are sent.

By placing false blame on a party it has a vested interest in destroying—the IRPT in this case—the Rahmon regime prioritized political expediency over facts, and is playing a very dangerous game in the process. By equating political opposition with “extremism” and terrorism, and establishing a false dichotomy between a “good” official Islam versus “bad” foreign Islam, the government increases the likelihood that those with grievances against the ruling party or the official religious hierarchy will see their only alternative in violent extremism. [Research](#) has shown that countering violent extremism by criminalizing religious and political pluralism is ineffective in the long term, and risks [exacerbating](#) the problem. In responding to the threat of terrorism, government officials continue to overestimate the role played by faith in general, and Islam in particular. Rather than a primary matter of theology or doctrine, experts increasingly understand radicalization to be rooted in specific grievances, often socio-economic, and especially tied to perceptions of injustice.

This appears to be the case in Tajikistan’s most high-profile incident of radicalization. On May 27, 2015, Colonel Gulmurod Halimov, the commander of an elite police unit in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, released a video swearing allegiance to IS. As a highly trained officer with intimate knowledge of Tajikistan’s security infrastructure, Halimov’s defection was a devastating blow to the

country, and a boon to the terrorists. In 2016, IS allegedly appointed him Minister of War, although he reportedly died in 2017. In an online message, Halimov claimed to have been [radicalized](#) through observing and participating in the government’s campaign against Islam. He claimed to have witnessed police following orders to create footage of women in hijabs drinking alcohol and engaging in sex acts—an apparent reference to the pornographic attacks leveled against the IRPT. Halimov equated these anti-Islamic policies with “democracy” and called on Tajikistani citizens to combat it by joining the Islamic State. By leading Halimov to conflate “democracy” with anti-religious authoritarianism, the government’s policies contributed to a dynamic in which opposition was more readily equated with violent extremism.

Prison radicalization is becoming a serious problem. Conditions in Tajikistani prisons are deplorable and closely on par with those chronicled in U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom’s (USCIRF) recent [report](#) on religious prisoners in Turkmenistan. [Torture](#) is endemic in the country and prisoners are often held in [large barracks](#) containing up to 200 people. One former prisoner [reported](#) that “it is not possible to sleep because the whole cell is infested with bugs” and claimed that food and toilet facilities are also located within the sleeping area. Upon arrival, prisoners were forced to strip naked, squat, and undergo cavity searches in the presence of the general population.

Tajikistani prisons also maintain a [caste structure](#) inherited from the Soviet gulag, in which authorities treat different categories of prisoners differently, dispensing privileges to certain groups in exchange for bribes or assistance policing the general population. Those charged with extremism and terrorism, referred to as “*Hizbovtsy*,” are housed with the general population, but prison officials treat them less favorably and subject them to greater restrictions and scrutiny. These prisoners also often face hostility from other segments of the prison population—especially those who answer to organized crime networks, which demand allegiance and punish non-conformity. The constant conflict between these groups has contributed to greater cohesion among the *Hizbovtsy*, which in turn has facilitated the circulation of extremist ideologies. One former prisoner [claimed](#) that under these conditions, 10 genuine radicals are able to “recruit 100–150 other prisoners” convicted on fabricated extremism charges or for minor offenses.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Tajikistan's current approach to counterterrorism and CVE is unsustainable. Its anti-religious policies generate grievances among the population, and its overcrowded, barbaric prison system is a hotbed for new extremists. Tajikistan faces a genuine threat from radical Islamist groups like the Islamic State, but its approach to dealing with it—such as blaming the IRPT—only further complicates matters. For example, in late 2019, the regime obfuscated the details of a [border attack](#) that IS had allegedly carried out. The government initially claimed that 20 IS militants attacked a border post near Afghanistan, and that 15 had been killed. It was later revealed that the conflict took place on the border with Uzbekistan, and that the group contained nine men, 11 women, and 13 children between the ages of four and 15. It is unknown whether women and children were among the dead.

The Rahmon regime's lack of transparency has only fed rumors and disinformation, ultimately obscuring the distinction between violent extremists and peaceful religious practitioners. The government's calculus, which sets a monolithic state-approved religion against an exaggerated host of frightening radicals, has been deeply counterproductive.

Although this Issue Update focuses on Tajikistan's official approach to the country's majority faith of Islam, religious minorities also face official harassment and fabricated extremism charges. The Jehovah's Witness community has been deemed illegal since 2007, and on September 10, 2019, Shamil Hakimov was [sentenced](#) to seven and a half years in prison—followed by three years prohibition from working in a religious organization—for sharing his beliefs as a Jehovah's Witness. In early 2019, government officials burned 5,000 Baptist calendars that they had seized at Dushanbe International Airport after being [deemed](#) "propaganda of an alien religion." Members of less traditional faiths in Tajikistan, such as [Seventh-Day Adventists](#) and [Presbyterians](#), as well members of communities with ancient ties to the region, like [Zoroastrians](#) and [Shi'a Muslims](#), all report a rise in anxiety and the perceived need to hide their religious affiliation.

Such anxieties have increased with the government's plan to include a religious affiliation component to the [census](#) in October 2020. This is the first time that a census in Tajikistan has included a question about religion since 1937, when the country was ruled by Joseph Stalin as part of the Soviet Union. Citizens have [reported](#) their reticence to answering these census questions truthfully, [fearing](#) that the government will use the information to carry out reprisals.

To sustainably counter and potentially prevent the growth of violent extremism, the government should allow a diverse array of religious voices to flourish in the country. The recent [decision](#) on October 14, 2020 to minimize punishments for "enmity" and "exclusivity" charges, which form the basis for many bogus extremism convictions, was a hopeful sign that the government recognizes the need for reform. Reducing the religious sphere to a confrontation between the government and "extremists" is a losing strategy.

In its 2020 Annual Report, USCIRF again recommended that the U.S. Department of State (DOS) designate Tajikistan as a "country of particular concern" (CPC) for its systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. The State Department has made this designation since 2016, but has always included a national security waiver that, in effect, nullifies the negative consequences as mandated by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). As discussed in this report, Tajikistan's current approach to CVE is counterproductive and not in the long-term interests of regional stability or security. We again urge the State Department to lift the waiver and use punitive measures to increase pressure for genuine reform, including the changes to the 2009 religion law, the immediate release of religious prisoners, and unrestricted access to Tajikistani prisons by international observers. In addition, the United States should mandate religious freedom training for Tajikistani officials, including education about the benefits of religious freedom for CVE, as part of all U.S. security assistance to Tajikistan.



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