



# Terrorism Monitor

In-Depth Analysis of the War on Terror

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## TRIBAL DISPUTE MAKES OIL-RICH ABYEI REGION POTENTIAL FLASHPOINT FOR RENEWED SUDANESE CONFLICT

The future of the Sudan may lay in Abyei, a relatively small district on the border between Sudan's North and South. Its status as part of either North or South Sudan will be determined in a plebiscite on January 9, held simultaneously with a referendum in the South that is expected to lead to the secession of the Southern provinces. Though the Abyei region is rich in high-quality crude oil, a conflict with the potential to ignite a new round of civil war may actually be fought over grazing rights.

Sitting atop the Muglad Basin, Abyei is one of Sudan's most productive regions for high-quality oil production. It is also home to the agricultural Ngok Dinka tribe, closely related to other Dinka clans in the South Sudan. However, for up to eight months a year it is also home to the nomadic Missiriya Arabs, part of the Baqqara (cattle-herding) Arab group that dwells in southern Darfur and southern Kordofan and takes its herds south for precious water and grazing during Sudan's dry season (*Asharq al-Awsat*, August 6, 2009).

Abyei's troubled status began in 1905 when the Anglo-Egyptian administration of Sudan transferred the "area of the nine Ngok Dinka chieftains" from the southern Bahr al-Ghazal province to the northern province of Kordofan. Relations between the Ngok Dinka and the Missiriya were amicable until the outbreak of the 1956-1972 North-South civil war, when the Ngok Dinka sided

largely with the southern Anyanya separatist movement. When the war resumed in 1983, the Ngok Dinka again sided with the Southern opposition, this time in the form of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M).

Beginning in 1965, the Missiriya and other Baqqara Arabs were armed by Khartoum, forming mounted units known as the Murahileen. These militias raided the southern civilian population in SPLA-controlled territory, carrying out atrocities and kidnappings with a free hand. Though relations between the southern agriculturalists and the nomadic Arabs had always been uneasy, this strategy opened an irrevocable gulf between the two communities in the Abyei region.

Clashes occurred in the region in 2007 and 2008, when the town of Abyei was effectively razed to the ground by government-allied forces. The borders of Abyei were redrawn by an international arbitration tribunal in 2009 to neither side's satisfaction, though the most productive oil fields were separated from a diminished Abyei and attached to the northern Kordofan province (RFI, July 22, 2009). The final status of the region is to be determined in a January 2011 referendum to be held simultaneously with the referendum on Southern independence, but a referendum commission has yet to be organized and there are still disputes regarding who is eligible to vote (*Sudan Tribune*, September 30; PANA Online [Dakar], September 24). With a vote for southern separation looking like a near certainty, the Missiriya fear that they will lose access to their traditional grazing lands. In this sense they are at odds with the National Congress Party of President Omar al-Bashir, which is willing to lose tribal grazing lands in favor of retaining oil fields.

As the plebiscite approaches and the question of whether the Missiriya will be allowed to vote on Abyei's future remains unresolved, the rhetoric of Missiriya leaders has grown more incendiary. According to Missiriya chief Mukhtar Babo Nimr, "We will use force to achieve our rights and we will use weapons against anyone who tries to stop us from voting in the referendum... If they don't meet our demands then we will set everything alight. If that leads to war then so be it" (Reuters, September 29). The Missiriya have prevented the demarcation of the new tribunal-ordered borders and the summer was marked by demonstrations organized by both the Njok Dinka and the Missiriya, as well as a number of attacks on villages by gunmen. Arop Madut

Arop, a parliamentarian from Abyei, noted the southern peoples of Abyei "may take up arms. Their people in the SPLA/M may defect and go and join them and suddenly the northern army will also come in [and] within a few days, Sudan is back to war" (IRIN, July 8).

#### PKK COMMANDER SUGGESTS KURDISH ALIGNMENT WITH ISRAEL AGAINST TURKEY

PKK Commander Murat Karayilan compared the situation of Turkey's Kurds to the Jewish Holocaust in a public appeal to Israel to ally itself with the radical Kurdish nationalist movement against the Turkish state. The appeal was made in a recent interview with an Israeli journalist that was later broadcast on Israel's Channel 2 Television (*Haaretz*, September 22).

More than any other people in the world, I would have expected Israel to understand and identify with us. After all, you, who have experienced the Holocaust, massacres, expulsions and persecution, now see our people, the Kurdish people, experiencing that same fate. Everyone in this area - Syrians, Turks and Iranians - wants and is trying to destroy us, and you, of all people, are the ones providing them with the weapons to destroy us.

Karayilan was interviewed at a secret hideout in the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq, close to the border with Iran. With PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan confined to a Turkish prison, Karayilan has emerged as the effective leader of the Kurdish cross-border insurgency. Ocalan was seized in Nairobi in 1999, allegedly by a team of Israeli Mossad agents who turned the PKK leader over to Turkish security services (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], February 27). Since then, however, there has been a general belief in Turkey that Israel has provided arms and training to PKK and Peshmerga fighters in northern Iraq. An Israeli commando team involved in training Kurdish Peshmerga fighters in northern Iraq was forced to withdraw in 2005 after their presence was made public, but recent reports indicate Israeli military trainers have returned to the region (*Yedioth Ahronoth*, December 1, 2005; Ynet, December 1, 2005; *Arutz Sheva*, February 5; *Today's Zaman*, June 9).

Despite this belief, one of the PKK commander's main concerns was the supply of Israeli-made Heron class unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to the Turkish military. The UAVs have been highly effective in locating PKK

positions in difficult terrain for targeting by Turkish forces (see *Terrorism Focus* Briefs, April 1, 2008).

Once we were friends. In the 1960s and 1970s, Israel went out of its way to assist the Kurds. We admired you. But since the 1980s, from the moment you tightened your relationship, and your military cooperation, with Turkey, you have been considered here to be among those who systematically assist in our oppression and eradication... It is clear and natural to us that there should be relations between Israel and Turkey. Why not? But why should these relations come at our expense, at the expense of our lives? I wonder if Israelis are at all aware of the use that is made of the weapons and training they provide to Turkey.

Israel has not made an official statement on Karayilan's interview, but an Israeli diplomat requesting anonymity told a Turkish daily, "The Israeli position is known and clear. We see the PKK as a terrorist organization and we support the Turkish fight against terror" (*Today's Zaman*, September 22).

Despite what seemed to be a vicious public disagreement between Israel and Turkey following the May 31 Israeli commando raid on a Turkish ship carrying aid to Gaza, diplomatic and military officials worked behind the scenes to ensure economic and military ties remained relatively undamaged by the feud (*Hurriyet*, September 22; see *Terrorism Monitor* Briefs, June 12). Karayilan, however, attempted to exploit the rift:

More than any other Turkish head of state, this prime minister, [Recep Tayyip] Erdogan, openly shows how he is tightening relations with Hezbollah and Syria. He hugs [Iranian President Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad and praises Hamas. Are you sure this is your friend?

An important ministerial summit between Turkey and Syria is scheduled for October 2-3, with terrorism expected to be one of the principal topics of discussion. Turkey is intent on improving economic relations with Syria and has already received Syrian support on the PKK issue (*Hurriyet*, September 28). However, the May 31 incident brought an abrupt end to Turkish efforts to mediate between Syria and Israel. Turkish interior minister Besir Atalay is also expected to meet soon with his counterparts in Syria and Iran to discuss the PKK threat.

Only a few days before Karayilan's interview was broadcast, three PKK members were reported arrested in the port city of Jounieh by Lebanon's Military Intelligence on charges of spying for Israel (*Journal of the Turkish Weekly*, September 23). Lebanon has arrested over 70 people on suspicion of spying for Israel since April 2009 (AFP, September 24).

## Islamist Terrorism in Europe: Could Greece Be Next?

By Panagiotis Kostakos

Radical Islamist groups, including al-Qaeda, have the means and resources to target European citizens both in Europe and abroad. However, Islamist terrorist groups have not yet directly hit Greece. Why is that the case?

From a strategic standpoint, Greece is not a major player in the "war on terrorism." The country has not deployed any troops in Iraq and the Greek troops currently stationed in Afghanistan participate mainly in low risk engineering and medical activities as well as training missions (To Bhma Online [Athens], August 31). Furthermore, there is a cultural explanation. Modern Greeks, Afghans and Palestinians share a common history and mythology that can be traced back to Alexander the Great. [1] Al-Qaeda leaders have always shown an interest in exploiting the mythology of civilizations and have used soft power to gain a strategic advantage against their adversaries.

Thus, in theory, an attack against Greece lacks the symbolism and strategic interest that al-Qaeda seeks for the construction of its own mythology, identity and propaganda. However, these observations do not necessarily erase the possibility that radical Islamic groups are trying to gain a foothold in Greece.

Indeed, there is a pragmatic expectation that radical Islamist groups could participate in low-risk assignments and psychological operations (such as recruitment, funding, propaganda and training) that would not be easily detected by Greek or other authorities. The Greek context facilitates such operations for a number of reasons:

- Geographical proximity to countries that export radicalism
- Illegal migration and porous borders
- Social unrest
- A growing Muslim community
- Indigenous terrorist networks
- Corruption in the private and public sectors

These are just some of the pieces of the puzzle that make this scenario ever more realistic (see *Terrorism Monitor*, August 2, 2007).

However, is there hard evidence to support the assertion that such a secretive radical organization exists in Greece? Confidential reports and interviews with informants suggest that there is fire behind the smoke. [2]

Various intelligence sources conclude that the Greek immigration policy has deterred many radical Islamist networks from establishing permanent ties in the country. A security brief issued during the 2004 Olympic Games noted, “The legal environment was for many years an obstacle for the growth and development of organized networks that could operate overtly or covertly using religious and cultural organizations and NGOs as legitimate fronts.” This policy, however, unintentionally leads many groups to go underground.

The Greek secret service has mapped a transnational network of radicals that has been developing in Greece over the years. Field informants indicate that this semi-legal web spreads across five different communities, including:

- Mosques and local Muslim communities
- Humanitarian organizations and NGOs

- Islamic cultural centers in Europe
- Foreign political, economic and religious elites
- International Islamist terrorist organizations

The key members of this network (referred to as “The Union of Mosques” or “The Union of Imams”) have military training and combat experience and are well connected with terrorist groups, foreign governments and the Muslim Diaspora in Europe (mainly in Britain, Italy and France). They use criminal activities to finance and facilitate their ideological objectives. The most noticeable illegal activities they conduct are passport forging, arms trafficking, people smuggling and drug trafficking. Finally, according to the same sources, the network has developed an internal structure to support fundraising, recruitment and counter intelligence activities.

The confluence of actors and structures reported in the intelligence files indicates strong links with other European capitals. This conclusion gains additional support when cross-referencing surveillance reports and open source intelligence. Arrests of Islamist radicals in Europe will often trigger changes in the everyday routines of some members of the network in Greece. Members of the network were, for instance, advised to change their appearance, shave their beards, move to a friendly country and avoid talking openly when meeting in mosques or in other public places. Changes in the modus operandi of the network were also recorded in the immediate aftermath of the London and Madrid bombings.

A number of economic, political and cultural issues could have a direct impact on the security of Greece. These include:

- Liberalization of immigration laws
- Stronger bilateral economic and military relations between Israel, Cyprus, Greece and the United States (see *Hurriyet*, September 29)
- Oil extraction in the Aegean Sea
- Radicalization of Turkish Muslims (see *Ta Nea* [Athens], June 16; *To Vima tis Kiriakis* [Athens], May 30)

- The political role of the Muslim minority in Greece and the growing legal/illegal Muslim community in Athens and Thessaloniki
- The Macedonian name dispute

An attack is unlikely to occur in the current situation. However, future developments on the aforementioned political, socio-cultural and economic issues could change this dynamic and activate or radicalize Islamist networks in Greece. So far, the network based in Greece performs mainly non-violent activities, but provides support for other groups based in larger European cities. Future political decisions could tilt the network toward more militant activities.

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#### Notes:

1. Early Muslim scholars for example, believed that Dhul-Qarnain (“the two-horned”), a pre-Islamic figure mentioned in the Koran (XVIII, 83-98), was Alexander the Great. See: R. A. Anderson, “Alexander’s Horns,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 58, (1927) pp. 100-122.
2. The documents were supplied by a retired officer of the Greek secret service. Interviews with high ranking officers from the police and the secret services were conducted in Athens in the summer of 2008 and in the fall of 2009 for a more updated assessment.

## Insurgent Groups React to the Withdrawal of American Combat Forces in Iraq

*By Rafid Fadhil Ali*

The withdrawal of the last combat units of the U.S. army from Iraq at the end of August attracted reactions from various Iraqi insurgent groups. On September 1 the number of U.S. troops in Iraq dropped to less than 50,000 personnel. The U.S. army announced that the role of the remaining troops would now be focused on supporting and training the Iraqi government forces.

Iraq’s Sunni insurgent groups in general looked at the change suspiciously. Most of them did not consider the pullout an actual withdrawal, as tens of thousands of troops remained stationed in Iraq. However, most insurgent factions declared that the partial withdrawal was an indication of defeat that came as a result of military resistance. Abdullah al-Hafiz, the spokesman of al-Jabha al-Islamiya li’l-Moqawama al-Iraqiya (JAMI - Islamic Front for Iraqi Resistance), stated, “The partial withdrawal of the occupation is an inevitable result of the strength of the blows that were inflicted on its forces in Iraq by the Iraqi resistance with all its factions. The withdrawal in itself is a victory for the Iraqi forces; however, it is not the end of the road” (Al-Arab Online, September 4).

The Sunni insurgency in Iraq has lost much of its momentum over the last three years, yet two factors will be crucial in deciding its future direction. First is the level of representation of the Sunni community in the next government. The second factor is the fate of the fighters belonging to the local Sunni militias of the Sahwa (Awakening) councils. The U.S. military armed and funded the Sahwa fighters, who played a major role in the success of the American surge strategy. They have been struggling since the Americans turned over to them the responsibility of the Iraqi government. The Sahwa fighters, mostly drawn from ex-insurgents belonging to Iraq’s Sunni tribes, want to be fully integrated with the security forces, while the Shi’a-led government has offered to accept only 20% of them. As part of its post-U.S. withdrawal strategy, al-Qaeda is using a stick and carrot approach with the Sahwa fighters. Al-Qaeda has killed many of the Sahwa leaders and members but it has also offered a pardon for those who rejoin the insurgency (*al-Hayat*, August 22).

The former ruling Ba'ath party also denied the withdrawal had any significance and described it as "a lie" while calling for the resistance to continue. However, the Syrian-backed wing of the Ba'ath, led by General Muhammad Younis al-Ahmad, has been adapting to the new stage. For the first time since the fall of Saddam Hussein there was media coverage for conferences and gatherings of al-Ahmad's group in Syria. Of course, this could not have happened without the approval of the Syrian host (*al-Watan*, August 30).

Though most of the Sunni insurgent groups called for continued resistance to the "American occupation," al-Qaeda had a different assessment. Months before the September 1 draw-down, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI – an umbrella group for al-Qaeda and its allies) had already set its strategy for the post-withdrawal stage. ISI strategy indicated that there would be no use in concentrating attacks on the decreasing U.S. presence and called instead for the targeting of Iraqi forces and Sahwa fighters (*hanein.info*, February 20).

On the Shi'a side there was also a much skepticism and calls for continuing the fight against the Americans. The followers of radical Shi'a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr believed that nothing changed after the withdrawal (*pc-sadr.com*, September 2). More radical Shi'a groups confirmed that they would continue targeting U.S. forces. Those groups, especially Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), the largest among them, have been claiming that the gradual reduction of the numbers of U.S. troops was a result of their fight in central and southern Iraq (*Rohana.org*, September 2, *Asharq al-Awsat*, September 24)

September 1 was an important benchmark in the gradual process of the American withdrawal from Iraq. However, for most of the insurgent groups the end of 2011 will be of more importance. If by that date a complete American withdrawal from Iraq is accomplished, as agreed between Washington and Baghdad, the insurgent groups will lose their main opponent. In this event, we may expect the following approaches from Iraq's insurgent groups:

- The Iraqi Sunni groups will most likely focus their enmity on the Shi'a Islamic parties and will continue to target the Iraqi armed forces. They have always accused the Shi'a parties of being controlled by Iran.
- The Ba'ath party will not relinquish their dream of returning to power. Armed groups linked to the Ba'ath will remain a threat.

- Al-Qaeda's ISI will intensify its activities as the international organization of al-Qaeda still regards Iraq as one of the main arenas for confronting their enemies.

- The future of the Shi'a armed groups will depend mainly on Iran. Many of those groups, in particular the AAH, now have an expanded international agenda encompassing Shi'a communities beyond Iraq in the greater Middle East. This is now unlikely to be affected even by a full U.S. withdrawal.

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## Jihad in the Rasht Valley: Tajikistan's Security Dilemma

*By Andrew McGregor*

Efforts by Tajikistan President Emomali Rahmon to solve his problem with Islamist militants through lengthy sentences for detained opposition members encountered a serious reversal on August 22 when 25 militants made a dramatic escape from a State National Security Committee (SNSC) remand center Tajikistan's capital city of Dushanbe, killing four guards in the process.

Tajikistan has experienced little internal success since obtaining its independence from the collapsing Soviet Union in 1991. A devastating civil war followed from 1992 to 1997, which provoked the loss of most of Tajikistan's ethnic Russian and European population, which formed much of the country's professional and administrative classes. A peace and reconciliation

agreement in 1997 promised a new era, but in recent years the regime has expelled most of the former armed Islamist opposition from their posts in the reconciliation government, adding to a wave of unrest fueled by corruption, economic failure and the revival of Islam after decades of Soviet repression.

### The Jailbreak

The SNSC remand center in Dushanbe has its own security staff and is located inside a larger remand center operated by the Ministry of Justice. Though the escapees appear to have been in control of the SNSC facility for four hours, they nevertheless took Justice Ministry guards by surprise as they burst out of the SNSC building dressed in regulation camouflage uniforms. One car was commandeered by the fugitives, but it is unclear how the rest escaped through the city without hindrance (*Avesta* [Dushanbe], August 25).

According to one report, the escapees were able to arm themselves with 20 pistols, seven AK-47 assault rifles, one machine-gun and four grenades (Nigoh [Dushanbe], September 1). Most of the fugitives had been charged with plotting a coup against the state and had been handed stiff sentences of 15 to 30 years imprisonment by Tajikistan's Supreme Court on August 20. Unidentified gunmen who were believed to be part of the group of escaped prisoners fought a four-hour gun-battle with Defense Ministry outposts in the Romit Canyon (about 45 km from Dushanbe) on September 3 (*Asia-Plus Online* [Dushanbe], September 3; *Itar-Tass*, September 3).

Authorities believe the escape was organized by Ibrohim Nasriddinov, who was serving 23 years for murder and the planning of a terrorist act. Nasriddinov was caught on September 7 (*Interfax*, September 7). He is frequently identified as a former inmate of Guantanamo Bay although his name does not appear on the official list of prisoners (RFE/RL, August 7, 2007; *Itar-Tass*, September 7). There were reports that Nasriddinov was treated as a "privileged" prisoner, being allowed to move around the facility freely at night (*Asia-Plus Online*, September 2). Close relations between prisoners and guards coupled with understaffing (three guards for 90 prisoners) were cited as reasons for the success of the escape (*Imruznews* [Dushanbe], September 1).

The fugitives included 15 citizens of Tajikistan, five citizens of Russia, four citizens of Afghanistan and two citizens of Uzbekistan (*Interfax*, September 7; *Khovar*

[Dushanbe], September 24). The two Uzbeks, Furkat Khalmetov and Khamidullo Yuldashov, were convicted of illegal border crossing and participating in an attempt to overthrow the government of Tajikistan, respectively (*Itar-Tass*, September 24).

A Dagestani escapee, Gusein Sulaymanov, was killed after wounding three policemen in a September 8 raid on a house used by militants (*Interfax*, September 29). Another escapee, Rahmiddin Azizov, a former Rasht Valley security officer, was killed in an operation in the Fayzobod district (*Asia Plus Online*, September 27; *Interfax*, September 29). Rahmiddin was serving a life sentence and was charged with belonging to a militant group led by his brother, Negmat (*RIA Novosti*, September 26).

Most of the fugitives were seized in last year's Operation Kuknor ("Poppy") and are alleged to have been former loyalists of Lieutenant General Mirzo Ziyoev, the military commander of the Tajik Islamists in the civil war who was given a high military rank and his own paramilitary in the reconciliation that followed the war (*Itar-Tass*, September 2). He was dismissed in 2006 and accused of having joined the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an assertion that was quickly denied by late IMU leader Tahir Yuldash (RFE/RL Uzbek Service, July 16, 2009; *Ferghana.ru*, July 16, 2009). Ziyoev was captured by security forces on July 11, 2009 and died later that day in crossfire between security forces and a group of militants (*Millat* [Dushanbe], July 23; *al-Jazeera*, July 16, 2009; *IWPR*, July 23, 2009).

Though some escapees were thought to be headed to the Afghanistan border, most were believed to be on their way to the eastern Tavildara district, where they were apprehended in a military sweep last year.

### The Dagestan Connection

One of four Dagestanis involved in the escape, Magomet Ahkmadov was named as one of the three men who led the breakout by killing four guards and wounding two others (*Interfax*, August 24). The other leaders included Mirzomen Abiyev, Kazbek Dzhabailov, and Gusein Sulaymonov, who was later killed in a gunfight with police (*Interfax*, September 29).

Another Dagestani, Ahmad Sultanov, was sentenced to nine years in prison only days after the prison break for "circulating extremist ideas" and making calls for jihad.

Sultanov is an alleged member of Dagestan's Shari'a Jamaat, one of the most active armed Islamist groups in the North Caucasus (Itar-Tass, August 27).

#### The Ambush in the Kamarob Gorge

Using grenades and automatic weapons, an unidentified militant group ambushed a military convoy in the Kamarob gorge of eastern Tajikistan, about 260 km from Dushanbe, on September 19. The attack killed at least 28 soldiers and left many more wounded, leaving the government to suspect experienced guerrilla leaders like Mirzokhuja Ahmadov (a.k.a. "Belgi"), Abdullo Rakhimov and Alovudin Davlatov (a.k.a. Ali Bedak) of responsibility for the assault. Later reports put the death toll at 40 of the total 75 man detachment (RIA Novosti, September 20). The Tajik Defense Ministry insisted fighters from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Chechnya were part of the ambush force (Itar-Tass, September 26).

Tajik security officials identified Abdullo Rakhimov (better known as "Mullo Abdullo") as the main suspect, and a later video message from an IMU spokesman claimed responsibility on behalf of the movement, which has had little presence outside the northwest frontier region of Pakistan since 2001. Issued by Abdufattokh Ahmadi, the message said the attack was a response to several issues, including the closure of "thousands" of mosques, unreasonable detention of Muslims, a prohibition on headscarves, and government cooperation with the United States and NATO against Afghanistan's Muslims (Radio Liberty Tajik Service, September 23; Ferghana.ru, September, 24).

Calls for the resignation of the Tajik defense minister followed criticism that the army is consisted of poorly-trained and poorly-supplied workers and farmers, many of whom are young and without military experience (*Farazh* [Dushanbe], September 22; *Chark-i Gardun* [Dushanbe], September 22). Last June the United States announced it would build a \$10 million Counterterrorism Training Center at Qarotogh in Tajikistan's Shahrinav District, pending an agreement with the Tajikistan government. Both Washington and Dushanbe have made it clear that the center will train only Tajik soldiers and will not house American military personnel. U.S. assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian Affairs, Robert Blake, told reporters on September 1 that the United States had no intention of establishing a military presence in Tajikistan (Interfax, September 7).

#### Tajik Military Operations Following the Kamarob Gorge Ambush

Two days after the ambush in the Kamarob Gorge, government troops began searching houses in the Rasht Valley belonging to former members of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), the leading opposition front in the civil war. Security forces encountered resistance at the home of Mirzokhuja Ahmadov, where five of Ahmadov's followers were killed in a gunfight. Security forces reported seizing assault rifles, grenade launchers, mines and three completed bombs containing nearly 20 kg of explosives (RIA Novosti, September 23). Ahmadov himself was not found at the scene and his whereabouts remain unknown. The former Islamist warlord was formerly head of the government's organized crime unit in the Rasht Valley following post-civil war reintegration efforts. An attempt to arrest him in 1998 resulted in the shooting death of Oleg Zakharchenko, chief of Tajikistan's OMON police unit, by one of Ahmadov's men (see *Terrorism Monitor*, June 12, 2009). Government officials have accused Ahmadov of sheltering Mullo Abdullo in his home since the latter's return from Afghanistan (RFE/RL, September 28). The government attack reportedly prompted another former opposition commander, Shoh Iskandarov, to join the militants in the mountains (RFE/RL, September 22).

The raid on Ahmadov's residence came only a week after Defense Minister Sherali Khayrulloev, Interior Minister Abdurahim Qahhorov and SCNS Deputy Leader Mansurjon Umarov met with Ahmadov and Iskandarov to assure them military operations in the Rasht Valley were intended only to apprehend Mullo Abdullo (RFE/RL, September 15). There were also rumors that the ministers had asked for the ex-warlords' cooperation in hunting down Mullo Abdullo. The ambush in the Kamarob Gorge appears to have led to a turnabout in government policy. According to an Interior Ministry spokesman, two more members of Ahmadov's group were detained without resistance on September 29, but many other suspected members of Ahmadov's group might be released due to lack of evidence (RFE/RL, September 29).

The pursuit of the spectral Mullo Abdullo, who largely disappeared from view after reports he was captured by government forces in Afghanistan's Kandahar province in 2002, and who may or may not have returned to the Rasht Valley last year, consumes much of the efforts of Tajikistan's security forces and provides a convenient bogeyman for government use. Mullo Abdullo has not

been seen in Tajikistan since September 2000, when a government offensive destroyed most of his group. Mullo Abdullo's wife claims she does not know the whereabouts of her husband and does not believe he was responsible for the ambushed convoy (Asia-Plus Online, September 27).

Continuing military operations are being led by the chief of the Tajik General Staff, Ramil Nadyrov, and are reported to involve Tajik Special Forces and helicopter gunships (Itar-Tass, September 30; AFP, September 20). Rumors of Russian intervention in the form of troops or helicopters from the Russian 201st Motor Rifle Division base in Tajikistan began circulating after several alleged sightings in early September, but both Tajik and Russian sources denied the involvement of Russian personnel in the counterterrorist operations (*Avesta*, September 8; Itar-Tass, September 30). The 201st Division is permanently based in Tajikistan where it has been responsible for guarding the border with Afghanistan against militant incursions since 2001. While some Tajiks suspected Russian involvement in the hunt for the fugitives, others accused Russian or other "foreign forces" of engineering the escape (*Farazh* [Dushanbe], September 1; *Millat* [Dushanbe], September 1).

The mass escape, both alarming and humiliating, resulted in quick changes to the nation's security leadership. Colonel-General Khairidin Abdurakhimov was relieved of his duties as head of the State National Security Committee (SNSC) "at his own request" and was replaced by Saimumin Yatimov, a former diplomat who became involved in state security matters in 2000 (Asia Plus Online, September 2; Interfax, September 7). All other top officials of the SNSC were dismissed, as well (Itar-Tass, September 2).

### The Khudzhand Suicide Bombing

A rare Tajik suicide car-bombing on September 3 targeted a regional police unit in the northern town of Khudzhand (350 km north of Dushanbe), killing at least two policemen and injuring nearly two dozen others (Interfax, September 3; September 7; Asia-Plus Online, September 3; *Avesta*, September 3; Daydzhest Press [Dushanbe], September 9). Authorities blamed the IMU, but responsibility for the attack was later claimed by a previously unknown group calling itself Jamaat Ansarullah. The claim suggested the assailants were local in origin; "The operation was carried out in response to the killing and humiliation of our brothers and ordinary Muslims behind the walls of

that God-damned place" (Kavkaz-Tsentr, September 8). A representative of Tajikistan's Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) was hesitant in accepting the claim, saying "enemies of Islam" invent organizations with Arab names to tie Muslims to acts of violence. "As far as we know, there is no such organization even among banned religious organizations in our country. I even doubt that it exists in the world," stated the IRP representative (Asia-Plus Online, September 11).

A September 5 explosion at a Dushanbe disco that wounded seven people was at first believed to be an attack by radical Islamists, but investigations revealed the blast was the result of "gross misconduct by visitors using pyrotechnics" (Interfax, September 7).

### Taliban on the Border

On September 10, a Tajik border patrol encountered what they described as a large group of Islamist fighters, including Afghan Taliban, trying to cross the border from Afghanistan. A firefight lasting nearly 24 hours ensued, with the border police eventually driving off the Taliban incursion. Authorities claimed one officer and 20 Taliban were killed. Though only seven Taliban bodies were recovered, officials said the rest were observed being put into the river by their former comrades to be carried away. The battle took place roughly 210 km south of Dushanbe on the banks of the River Pyandzh and on a number of islands in the river occupied by Taliban fighters (Reuters, September 11; AFP, September 13).

### Response from the Legal Islamist Opposition

In an effort to curb extremism, President Emomali Rahmon has asked parents to arrange for the return of their children studying at Islamic institutions abroad, claiming they were being trained as "extremists and terrorists" (Asia-Plus Online, August 30). The request proved highly controversial and brought pointed criticism from the opposition Islamic Renaissance Party (the only legal Islamic party in Tajikistan) (Asia-Plus Online, August 26).

The IRP responded to the new violence by issuing a call for national unity and a halt in the process of destabilization (*Ozodagon* [Dushanbe], September 22). Party leader Muhiddin Kabiri said his appeals to the government to open discussions with the militant opposition had fallen on deaf ears and led to the current violence (*Najot* [Dushanbe], September 23).

Kabiri maintains that moderates form the majority in Tajikistan, but both the secular government and the armed Islamist opposition are now dominated by extremists. The government has jailed more than 100 members of banned Islamic groups in the last year alone. Kabiri's views on the violence were sought by assistant to the U.S. secretary of state on South and Central Asia Robert Blake during a recent two-day visit to Dushanbe (*Vechniy Dushanbe*, September 7).

### Conclusion

It is difficult to get a clear picture of the security picture in Tajikistan. Foreign press reports are quick to work al-Qaeda into their headlines, with reports suggesting all of Tajikistan's militants are somehow operatives of that organization. Tajik authorities prefer to blame their troubles on a revival of the IMU in Tajikistan or alternatively to blame Islamist opponents of the government who have already been subject to a campaign of marginalization for some years. The possible emergence of new groups such as the Jamaat Ansarullah and the pursuit of shadowy figures such as Mullo Abdullo tend to confuse the picture even more. Along the frontier with Afghanistan there is the risk of fugitive militants escaping across the border to join the Taliban while other groups of Taliban are apparently trying to make their way into Tajikistan. Presenting its troubles in the framework of the "war on terrorism" allows the Dushanbe government to avoid discussions of official nepotism, corruption and inefficiency as factors causing unrest in the country.

The small number of militants active in Tajikistan does not pose an existential threat to the nation, as some have suggested. They have little influence outside the Rasht Valley and do not enjoy the levels of popular support the armed opposition had in the 1990s. However, economic stagnation and the continuing marginalization of all types of political opposition threaten to create the conditions in which militant groups could flourish, especially those offering an Islamic solution to Tajikistan's problems in harmony with the nation's ongoing grass-roots Islamic revival.

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