

**Op-Ed Contributor**

# The Tajiks' Forgotten War

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On June 16, Alexander Sodiqov, a Ph.D student in political science at the University of Toronto, [was arrested](#) in his native Tajikistan and reportedly charged with espionage and treason. His crime: investigating a local conflict that the government would rather you not know anything about.

It is easy to keep secrets in the Pamir Mountains — the rugged, sparsely populated eastern region of Tajikistan that borders China and Afghanistan. There is one flight a day from the capital Dushanbe to the region's main city, Khorog, and it is canceled at the slightest hint of bad weather. The only alternative is a 15-or-so-hour drive over rough mountain roads. Foreigners need a special permit to visit; during times of tension the government stops issuing those, and it cuts off phone and Internet access to the outside world.

Since becoming an independent country in 1991, Tajikistan has struggled to assert its control over the Pamirs, where informal leaders (known generally as "commanders") who are often involved in smuggling and other criminal activities hold substantial power. The Pamirs are home to the Pamiri people, who speak a different language from other Tajiks, and follow the Ismaili branch of Shiite Islam (most Tajiks are Sunni). Many of Tajikistan's roughly 135,000 Pamiris have come to see themselves as victims of a chauvinistic dictatorship that wants to suppress their culture. Pamiris are among the strongest opponents of President Emomali Rahmon, whose 22-year rule over Tajikistan has become more and more kleptocratic and nepotistic.

In the summer of 2012, after a local security official was killed near Khorog, which is by the Afghan border, the government undertook a military operation there. Ostensibly aimed at capturing several commanders it blamed for the official's death, the operation's scale and intensity made it seem more like an attempt to finally get the Pamirs under control. Snipers stationed on the two steep ridges that encase the town fired indiscriminately at residents, backed up by mortars and helicopters.

If anything, though, the operation cemented the commanders' position as defenders of the Pamiris. When I visited Khorog last summer, I found a town united in its opposition to the government. One resident who had previously opposed the commanders told me that when the fighting started in 2012, "I didn't think twice about which side I was on; these were invaders." Unexpectedly strong resistance from the Pamiris forced the military to retreat.

The conflict then mostly lay dormant, at least until May of this year, when protests broke out in Khorog after police officers shot at a car of suspected drug dealers in the city center. Residents took to the streets for several hours and set fire to some government buildings.

The government blamed outside forces for the instability. A top presidential adviser, Sherali Khairulloyev, said that the protests had been orchestrated by foreigners — whom, bizarrely, he claimed to have spoken to by phone in Dushanbe and yet would not identify. A member of Parliament suggested that NATO and Saudi Arabia were fomenting rebellion in the Pamirs. The head of the G.K.N.B., the state security agency, accused the foreign security services of unnamed “big countries” of working with local criminal groups to destabilize Tajikistan. When the British ambassador traveled to Khorog earlier this month, he was prevented from meeting with local activists.

It was in this atmosphere that on June 15 Mr. Sodiqov went to Khorog for field work for a project, run by the University of Exeter, on conflict management in Central Asia. The next day he was interviewing a local opposition politician, Alim Sherzamonov, in the city’s central park when plainclothes officers interrupted the meeting and took him away.

Mr. Sodiqov is now believed to be in the custody of the G.K.N.B. He has not been seen since his arrest, except in an interview broadcast on local television that was heavily edited in an apparent attempt to discredit both Mr. Sherzamonov and the Aga Khan, the Ismaili spiritual leader, whom the government fears as an alternate source of authority among the Pamiris. As of June 25, close to 1,900 Central Asia scholars had signed an [open letter](#) expressing concerns over Mr. Sodiqov’s safety. He is 31 years old and married with a young daughter. If convicted of treason and espionage, he faces 20 years in prison.

And all that because, as the political scientist Parviz Mullojonov wrote last week in the Tajik newspaper Asia Plus, Mr. Sodiqov became a victim of the government’s “search for external enemies” to explain its internal problems.

Some of Tajikistan’s suspected enemies, incidentally, are among its most important partners. The United States and Russia, for example, have provided substantial aid to the government, believing that Tajikistan is a linchpin of stability in Central Asia and that maintaining order in the region outweighs concerns about Mr. Rahmon’s arbitrary and occasionally violent governance.

The United States has given Tajikistan \$278 million in military assistance since 2001, and has helped train and equip the G.K.N.B. for counterterrorism and counternarcotics operations. As Western troops prepare to withdraw from Afghanistan, Russia has promised substantial support to the Rahmon government. This is part of a deal that extends by three decades Moscow’s lease on a Soviet-era military base in Tajikistan, but it is also a measure of the Russian government’s fears that radical Islamism could bleed north from Afghanistan.

And yet, with Mr. Sodiqov’s arrest, the Tajikistan government is once again blaming outside forces for destabilizing the Pamirs, all the while intimidating independent researchers from seeing for themselves what actually is happening there. That only portends an escalation of the conflict, and Tajikistan, rather than be a bulwark against instability in Central Asia, may well become part of the problem.

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