

The Nature, State and Capacity to Address Illicit Trade in Tajikistan and its Effect on “(In)Security in Central Asia

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Tajikistan has struggled to attain stability since its independence in 1991 and has regularly ranked as one of the world’s most fragile states. While cotton and aluminum production have provided some wealth, the country is largely dependent on foreign aid and faces significant challenges due to brisk flow of drugs crossing its borders from Afghanistan. With these issues in mind, The Terrorism, Transnational Crime, and Corruption Center (TraCCC) hosted a conference on Tajikistan, featuring Ashraf Haidari of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan and five of TraCCC’s top researchers.

After opening remarks from Dean Edward Rhodes and Senior Associate Dean Ann Baker of the School of Public Policy at George Mason University, TraCCC Director Dr. Louise Shelley gave a brief introduction that highlighted how TraCCC’s research success is based on long-term relationships with a network of researchers around the world as well as TraCCC’s capacity to conduct research in a variety of different languages. Turning to the subject of the conference, Dr. Shelley remarked how economic, social, and political indicators put Tajikistan on the same level as a number of countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Since achieving independence in 1991, Tajikistan’s decline has been dramatic with no end in sight. As a result, policymakers should be aware of Tajikistan’s fragility and what the regional and international implications of the fall of the Tajik state would be.

Panel #1, “Actors and the Stage: The State of Tajikistan Today”

Dr. Kimberley Thachuk, a Research Instructor at TraCCC, began the panel with a presentation entitled “Corruption and Cronyism.” She noted above all else, “in Tajikistan, it’s not what you know, but who you owe.” President Rahmon sits atop a pyramid structure of elites comprised of warlords and clan leaders who control different pieces of the country. To maintain power, Rahmon is under increasing pressure to dispense patronage to these elites who are both followers and opposition-members. There are three main resources upon which Rahmon may draw: aluminum, cotton, and drugs:

- 1) Tajikistan’s aluminum resources are directed to Rahmon through the state-owned company Talco. Currently, Talco is a loss-making enterprise, largely because Rahmon and his family use its revenue for personal enrichment and as patronage. In addition, Talco uses significant electricity which is diverted from civilian use leaving them without power regularly.
- 2) Following a recent audit by Ernst and Young, it was revealed that the head of Tajikistan’s national bank misappropriated \$800 million dollars designated as loans for the financing of the country’s cotton industry. As one half of Tajikistan’s seven million people are involved in the cotton industry, this represents a serious setback.
- 3) Drug routes have been divided up among warlords at least since Rahmon came to power, leading the country to be run virtually as a group of fiefdoms rather than a sovereign state. It is estimated that 15-30% of Afghan heroin transits Tajikistan on its way to

Russia, Europe, and China. Heroin flowing from Afghanistan is not lessening while , drug seizures by Tajik authorities dropped in 2009 by 10%

With revenue declining from aluminum and cotton, Rahmon increasingly depends on the drug trade to ease pressure from warlords and clan leaders. At the same, he continues to face pressures from a large outward migration of Tajik laborers which absence has caused a range of social problems. The Rahmon regime also faces increasing pressure from Russia to stop the flow of drugs.

Dr. Shelley spoke next and focused the audience's attention on the historical context essential to understanding Central Asia today. Dr. Shelley explained that the Emirate of Bukhara, previously one of the major states in Central Asia, extended to within 30 kilometers of Dushanbe, Tajikistan's current capital. In showing pictures of the last Emir of Bukhara, Dr. Shelley explained that President Rakhmon is the heir to an authoritarian tradition that existed long before he came to power. Contrasting the Russian imperial and Soviet approaches to Central Asia, Dr. Shelley noted that the Russian empire left Central Asian power structures in place while the Soviets sought to disrupt old patterns and begin regional power structures anew. Specifically, Soviet intervention led to the differentiation of groups such as Uzbek, Tajik, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Turkmen where such differentiation had not existed previously. In creating these official ethnic identities, the Soviet system assigned territory to these "titular ethnicities" and in the process drew the arbitrary map of Central Asia that the five states of the region live with today.

Ms. Karen Saunders, TraCCC's Senior Researcher and Senior Program Officer, concluded the first panel with a discussion on radicals and radicalization in Tajikistan. Initially, Ms. Saunders sought to explain how societal conditions are facilitating possibilities for radicalization in Tajikistan. These include retarded development due to Tajikistan's civil war from 1992-1997, a growing "youth bulge," extensive poverty and unemployment, and impact of huge outward labor migration on the country's social fabric. Moreover, the Tajik government has made clear its fear of political Islam and has taken a number of steps to ostensibly preserve the secular nature of Tajikistan. These steps include closing mosques and madrassas, banning the hijab, recalling all citizens from programs abroad that involve the study of Islam, and cracking down on the activities of religious groups. Nevertheless, radical organizations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) continue to have a presence in Tajikistan. In particular, IMU has long been suspected of involvement in the Central Asian drug trade and recent reports of contacts between disaffected Tajik warlords and IMU representatives have been received with trepidation by the Tajik government.

Panel #2, Terror and Crime: A Nexus or Just Convergence of Opportunity?

Dr. Alexander Kupatadze, currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Institute for European, Russian, and Eastern European Studies at the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University, led off the afternoon panel. Having recently returned from a research trip to Kyrgyzstan, Dr. Kupatadze shared a number of insights about the current state of the drug trade in Kyrgyzstan and its relationship to Tajikistan. Kyrgyzstan has been a conduit for Afghan drugs due to its geopolitical location, insecure borders, and pervasive corruption. Although there are routine drug seizures by Kyrgyz state officials, Dr. Kupatadze estimates that a very low

percentage of all drugs passing through Kyrgyzstan are confiscated, meaning that high-ranking drug bosses are hardly affected. Moreover, seizures are low because smuggling groups are increasingly sophisticated as well as because high-ranking law enforcement officers leading politicians are heavily involved. As resource-poor Kyrgyzstan has few sources of income, state actors have sought to gain monopoly over the drug trade. In regards to Tajikistan, increased state involvement in the Kyrgyz drug trade has meant that Uzbek middlemen, who previously worked with their Tajik counterparts to convey drugs through Kyrgyzstan, have been pushed out. Moreover, Tajik enclaves in Kyrgyzstan, such as Vorukh, continue to be havens for drug trafficking that are beyond the reach of Kyrgyz and Tajik drug enforcement officials.

Dr. Alisher Latypov, a Ph.D. candidate at University College London, followed Dr. Kupatadze's talk with a wealth of pertinent information about the history and current state of the drug trade in Tajikistan and Central Asia. Initially, Dr. Latypov emphasized that we are witnessing the re-emergence, not emergence, of the drug trade in Central Asia. This is to say that drugs have been flowing north from Afghanistan through Central Asia for centuries and the resurgence of the drug trade in the last ten years must be viewed in the proper historical context. With this in mind, there are number of factors about the current state of the drug trade worth noting. For one, opium production in Afghanistan has increased in recent years, while drug seizures in Central Asia have fallen. Yet with the increase in drugs trafficked through Central Asia, the level of drug-related crime has fallen in the region. Furthermore, regional drug-related crime statistics are driven by the arrests of drug users and drug couriers, not by police work done to address high-level drug crime. The skewing of crime data is due in part to heavy law enforcement involvement in the drug trade.

The conference's final speaker was Mr. Ashraf Haidari, the Deputy Chief of Mission of the Embassy of Afghanistan to the United States in Washington, D.C. Mr. Haidari sought to focus attention on Afghanistan's distinct lack of "stateness" and how governance is extremely weak in Afghanistan today. In particular, the Afghan police are largely compromised by drug trafficking and corruption, which fails to inspire popular trust in state agencies. Dismally low salaries facilitate bribe taking, which is seen as compensation for the low salaries. Furthermore, the Afghan government is unable to guarantee basic security in many regions of the country, which only serves to strengthen the Taliban, drug traffickers, warlords, criminals, and corrupt officials. The drug trade in particular is a major funding source for the insurgency, as money earned buys weapons and pays fighters, while also facilitating governance-undermining corruption. According to Mr. Haidari, a new U.S. strategy for Afghanistan must include increases in civilian assistance, alternative agricultural programs to combat opium cultivation, and serious work to improve the capacity of the Afghan National Police, which are the weakest link.