

Assessing the Capabilities of Tajikistan's Military and Security Forces:

The 2010-11 Rasht Valley Operations

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July 2012

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Since Tajikistan gained independence in 1991, its military and security forces have gone through a number of transitions and various stages of development. Observers often consider these forces incapable of handling domestic security issues, much less defending the country from external threats.¹ From a certain perspective this is a fair assessment, since Tajikistan relies on Russian security assistance and the presence of the Russian 201st Motorized Rifle Division for stability. However, events in 2010-11 demonstrated the operational capabilities and limitations of Tajikistan's security forces. Twenty-five militants escaped from a prison in Dushanbe in August 2010. In just over a year government forces not only killed or captured most of them, but also fought against large numbers of their supporters while doing so. While government forces took a high number of casualties during operations against militants in the Rasht Valley from September 2010 through April 2011, they were ultimately successful. The events of 2010-11 offer the best and most recent assessment of the capabilities of Tajikistan's military and security forces.

Background on Tajikistan's Military and Security Forces

When the Civil War in Tajikistan started in 1992, the Russian 201st Motorized Rifle Division, which had been in Tajikistan since the end of the Soviet-Afghan War, and a unit of the Russian Border Guards were the largest and most capable forces in the country. At the time the 201st consisted of 8,000 soldiers, including 200 *spetsnaz* (special forces) soldiers, while the Border Guards numbered 2,000 soldiers. These numbers increased when the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Peacekeeping Force deployed to Tajikistan in 1993. By the time the

Civil War ended in 1997 the Russian-led CIS Peacekeeping Force, which included the 201st, the Border Guards, and battalions from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, reached a high of over 28,000 soldiers. The Russian Border Guards remained in Tajikistan until 2005, when Tajikistan's Border Guards took over.² Russia reduced the number of soldiers in the 201st after the Civil War (current strength is around 7,000), but the division is still based in Tajikistan.³ While these forces were not indigenous to Tajikistan, they provided the most stability during the Civil War.

During the Civil War, the government of Tajikistan forces numbered several thousand. Most of these forces could be categorized as militias and were often more loyal to regional commanders than to the central government.⁴ These forces did not include those of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), although the majority of UTO fighters would be later integrated into the military and security services as part of the peace agreement that ended the war.⁵

The Russian government began providing weapons, equipment, and training to Tajikistan's government forces in 1993.⁶ Russian security assistance continued through the Civil War and into the present day. This assistance has included training (officers from Tajikistan have attended military colleges in Russia) and equipment (small arms, helicopters, armored vehicles, and air defense radar and missile systems).⁷ Russian assistance is not restricted to the Ministry of Defense (MoD); it also supports the security services of Tajikistan. Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) built up Tajikistan's Border Guards before the latter assumed responsibility for their own border security in 2005.⁸ Russian advisors continue to work with Tajikistan's Border Guards in training, intelligence, and operations.⁹ The current military and security forces of Tajikistan include the Army, the Air Force (including Air Defense Forces) under the MoD, the Ministry of the Interior (MVD), the National Guard, the Ministry of

Emergency Situations, and the Committee for State Border Protection (KOGG), which falls under the command of the State Committee for National Security (GKNB). Additionally, the GKNB has a special forces (*Alpha*) unit.¹⁰

Russia is not the only country to provide Tajikistan with security assistance. The United States has also assisted with training (particularly of Tajikistan's special operations forces) and has provided some equipment.¹¹ Other countries and international organizations have also provided assistance, but this is largely focused on border security and counternarcotics programs, including the establishment of the Drug Control Agency of Tajikistan.¹² Tajikistan has participated in joint exercises with the CIS Antiterrorist Center, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and on a bilateral basis.¹³ Many of these exercises focused on a scenario of combating a group of militants, similar to what security forces operated against in 2010-11.

It is difficult to determine exactly how foreign security assistance and joint exercises influenced or improved Tajikistan's military and security services after the Civil War. There are three incidents prior to 2010 that can measure their capabilities. Personnel from the MVD and GKNB clashed with former UTO commander Rakhmon Sanginov and his forces outside Dushanbe on June 22, 2001 and later killed Sanginov on August 10, 2001.¹⁴ On February 2, 2008 in the town of Garm (Rasht District), a colonel in the OMON (Special Purpose Police Unit) of the MVD was killed while attempting to apprehend former UTO commander Mirzokhuja Akhmadov.¹⁵ Additionally, former Minister of Emergency Situations and well known opposition commander, Mirzo Ziyoev, was killed in strange circumstances during a government security forces' operation on July 7, 2009.¹⁶ These incidents show a successful and a failed operation, as well as an operation that resulted in the death of then Minister Ziyoev. However,

the events from 2010-2011 offer the most recent example of the capabilities of Tajikistan's military and security forces.

The Prison Break in Dushanbe, August 22-23, 2010

On the night of August 22 and into the early morning of the 23rd, 25 men broke out of a GKNB detention facility in Dushanbe. A few of the prisoners planned the escape in advance with outside help. At around 2200 on August 22, a few prisoners killed one security guard and injured two others, seized their weapons, and then released the other detainees. The detention facility of the GKNB is located within a Ministry of Justice prison. A few hours passed before the group of men attacked the guard post of the Ministry prison (outer facility) and killed a few more guards. The men escaped in a stolen car and other vehicles driven by accomplices. The escaped men included Abdurasul Mirzoyev (brother of jailed former general Gaffor Mirzoyev) and Azamsho and Jonibek Ziyoev (relatives of Mirzo Ziyoev). None of the detainees were injured during their escape. Some of the guards reportedly received bribes to allow the detainees to escape.¹⁷ The government immediately began searching for the escapees, which led to operations in districts near Dushanbe, including the September operation in the Rasht District, where militants ambushed a column of soldiers.¹⁸

The Operations in the Rasht and Nurobod Districts, September 19, 2010-April 15, 2011

On September 19, in the Kamarob Gorge (Rasht District, around 185 km/115 miles east of Dushanbe), militants ambushed a convoy of MoD soldiers; 25 soldiers (including five officers) were killed and several injured. The convoy was part of an operation to capture some of the men who escaped from the GKNB detention facility (at the time of the ambush 18 men

were still at large). The government blamed former UTO commanders Abdullo Rakhimov (aka Mullo Abdullo) and Alloviddin Davlatov (aka Ali Bedaki) for organizing the ambush.¹⁹

The government arrested Husnuddin Davlatov, a Rasht District deputy councilman and brother of the suspect, and charged him with supplying explosives and other equipment to the militants. On September 20-21, government security forces also searched the homes of former UTO fighters in Rasht and issued a curfew effective from 2000-0600. A rumor circulated in the media that former UTO commander Akhmadov and several of his supporters surrendered their weapons to authorities. After the Tajik Civil War until 2008 Akhmadov had held a position in the Interior Ministry (with the department to combat organized crime in the Rasht District). Security forces conducted an operation on September 22 and destroyed Akhmadov's home after finding a cache of weapons there and killing some construction workers.²⁰ However, the former opposition commander's whereabouts were unknown.

On October 4, as government security forces continued operations in the Rasht District to apprehend the militants responsible for the ambush, four Interior Ministry OMON soldiers (including the commander) from the Khatlon Province and one police officer were killed. There were several reported casualties among the militants.²¹ On October 6 a National Guard helicopter crashed, killing the crew, several officers from the National Guard, and over a dozen members of a GKNB unit. Several soldiers were also reported killed by a landmine in a separate incident.²² On October 12 the government of Tajikistan announced an amnesty from criminal charges for any militants in the Rasht District who volunteered to surrender their weapons. On October 14 Akhmadov and Mullo Sayriddin, as well as a few dozen of their followers, agreed to surrender. Akhmadov also became involved in the search for Abdullo and Bedaki.²³

The operation against militants in the Rasht District continued through January, with occasional reports that security forces eliminated more militants.²⁴ On January 4, 2011 security forces killed several militants and reportedly captured one in a village near the town of Garm. The government announced that Bedaki was among those killed.²⁵ A few weeks after the operation a video of Bedaki being interrogated by security forces in the backseat of a vehicle was posted on *You Tube*. The video was removed a few times for various violations, but is now available.²⁶ The government also released a video of the results of the operation. The video shows Bedaki dead, along with several militants.²⁷

On April 14 government security forces launched an operation near the village of Samsolik (Nurobod District). The government stated that special units, helicopters, and artillery would be conducting a live-fire exercise near the Rasht District (adjacent to the Nurobod District) on April 14.²⁸ On April 15 security forces killed Abdullo and over a dozen militants in Samsolik. During the operation four people from various security services of Tajikistan were reportedly killed.²⁹

Operations to Recapture the Prisoners, September 2, 2010-November 13, 2011

The security services, including the GKNB, MVD, and local police, immediately began a search for the 25 escapees. The following is a list of the men in order of their capture or death:

- Ibrahim Nasriddinov (aka Kori Ibrahim), captured by the MVD on September 2, 2010 in the Vakhdat District³⁰
- Abdurasul Mirzoyev, captured by the MVD on September 6, 2010 in the Faizobod District³¹
- Magomed Akhmedov, captured by the GKNB on September 10, 2010 in Dushanbe³²
- Zaydullo Azizov, captured by the GKNB and MVD on September 10, 2010 in Dushanbe³³
- Saidismon Khujayev, captured (reportedly by the GKNB) on September 12, 2010 in the Jomi District, Khatlon Province³⁴

- Talibsho Naimov, captured (reportedly by the GKNB) on September 12, 2010 in the Jomi District, Khatlon Province³⁵
- Ali Aliev, captured on September 16, 2010 in the Vakhdat District³⁶
- Rakhmiddin Azizov, killed by the GKNB (with support of the MVD) on September 26, 2010 in the Faizobod District; Azizov evaded capture and wounded two members of the GKNB on September 18³⁷
- Husein Suleymanov, killed by the GKNB and MVD on September 28, 2010 in the Faizobod District³⁸
- Bozorali valadi Egamberdi, killed by the MVD and GKNB on October 4, 2010 in the Tavildara District³⁹
- Hikmatullo Azizov, captured (by security services of Tajikistan and Afghanistan) on December 18/19, 2010 in the Takhar Province, Afghanistan; Extradited to Tajikistan on December 25
- Bakhrom Orifjonov, captured (by security services of Tajikistan and Afghanistan) on December 18/19, 2010 in the Takhar Province, Afghanistan; Extradited to Tajikistan on December 25
- Makhmadamir valadi Kurbonali, captured (by security services of Tajikistan and Afghanistan) on December 18/19, 2010 in the Takhar Province, Afghanistan; reportedly remained in Afghanistan
- Mukhammadvali valadi Tozagul, captured (by security services of Tajikistan and Afghanistan) on December 18/19, 2010 in the Takhar Province, Afghanistan; reportedly remained in Afghanistan
- Makhmadzokir valadi Makhmadkhalim, captured (by security services of Tajikistan and Afghanistan) on December 18/19, 2010 in the Takhar Province, Afghanistan; reportedly remained in Afghanistan⁴⁰
- Fakhriddin Kokulov, killed by the MVD in the operation to neutralize Mullo Abdullo on April 15, 2011 in the Nurobod District⁴¹
- Juma Ibragimov, killed by MVD and GKNB on May 14, 2011 in the area of the Rasht and Nurobod Districts⁴²
- Mazkhariddin Khudoyorov, killed by the MVD on June 20, 2011 in the Rasht District⁴³
- Furkat Khalmetov, captured by the MVD on June 20, 2011 in the Rasht District⁴⁴
- Kazbek Jabrailov, captured by the MVD on July 6, 2011 in the Jirgatol District⁴⁵
- Nizami Abiev, captured by members of the State Committee of National Security of Kyrgyzstan on July 13, 2011 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan⁴⁶
- Jonibek Ziyoev, captured by the MVD and GKNB on July 25, 2011 in the Tavildara District⁴⁷
- Bakhriddin Hasanov, killed by the MVD and GKNB on July 25, 2011 in the Tavildara District⁴⁸
- Azamsho Ziyoev, captured by the MVD on November 13, 2011 in the Panj District⁴⁹
- Hamidullo Yuldoshev, fate unknown; reported still at large on July 26, 2011⁵⁰

The operations were ultimately successful; government forces killed the alleged militants who conducted the ambush in Kamarob (Abdullo and Bedaki) and recaptured or killed 24 out of 25 of the men who escaped from prison. However, this is not a presumption that there were no problems with the operations or that Tajikistan's forces are now capable of handling all possible future threats.

Some problems of the operations could have been avoided. It was suggested by one source in Tajikistan that the prison break could have been prevented, specifically criticizing the policies of the prison (allowing a few inmates to roam freely in the facility) and a weak response by some of the guards.⁵¹ The ambush in the Kamarob Gorge could have also been avoided. The column of soldiers ambushed and killed were a unit from the MoD, which utilizes conscripts and does not have the same level of training or capability as other units or ministry forces.⁵² The National Guard helicopter crash was another issue, especially considering the high number of casualties it caused in an elite unit. However, it is important to consider that aviation operations are difficult, even for highly trained forces, in a mountainous region like the Rasht Valley.⁵³

While a number of ministries were involved in operations to recapture the escaped criminals, members of the MVD and GKNB ultimately made the arrests or killed the escapees. It is unknown why the government also utilized MoD forces. It is likely that they needed all available assistance in recapturing the men. The MVD and GKNB, in coordination with local police, operated fairly effectively in several districts within the Khatlon Province and the Districts of Republican Subordination. Of the 25 prisoners who escaped, forces from the two ministries captured eleven and killed seven in Tajikistan, security forces of Afghanistan captured five (two were later extradited to Tajikistan, the other three are citizens of Afghanistan and reportedly remained there to stand trial), and Kyrgyzstan's National Security Committee arrested

one (a Russian citizen, fate unknown). Only one prisoner remains at large, his whereabouts unknown.

In the past the two ministries were not known for being able to operate effectively in former (Civil War) opposition areas, where a number of the escaped prisoners were found, but it now appears they are able to conduct operations successfully there. While the prisoners appear to have had a support network to help hide and move them, government forces tracked down the prisoners to specific locations. In most cases the MVD and GKNB attempted to capture the prisoner, and used force when fired upon. No civilian casualties were reported during operations to capture the prisoners. Members of the MVD, GKNB, and the National Guard (with what appeared to be support from other units and possibly other ministries) also eliminated Bedaki and Abdullo in regions where the former opposition had a strong support network.

While the government's security forces should be credited with successful operations, it is necessary to look at the threat level and capability of the militants and prisoners in order to make as accurate an assessment as possible. The prisoners were captured alone or in small groups. Those who resisted were armed with some combination of Kalashnikov assault rifle, Makarov pistol, and/or hand grenade. Only one prisoner, Rakhmiddin Azizov, temporarily evaded capture when he wounded members of the GKNB. The prisoners did not regroup and resist as a unit; it appears that they were more interested in fleeing and remaining hidden. Recapturing two dozen prisoners in these circumstances was well within the capabilities of Tajikistan's security forces.

It was not clear exactly how many militants participated in the ambush or fought against the government in the subsequent operation. However, based on reports of the number of militants killed from September 2010 to April 2011, the video that the government released after

killing Bedaki and his group, and reports of the number of followers of Bedaki and Abdullo, each former UTO commander had a group with a strength of over a dozen militants with a variety of small arms.⁵⁴ Unlike the operation to recapture prisoners, government forces took numerous casualties. While government forces did not initially succeed in the operation, it appears that security forces learned from past operations, particularly in the Rasht Valley.

The MVD's attempt to apprehend Akhmadov in 2008 failed, partly because the OMON unit quite simply drove up in trucks and did not have support from other units and ministries, like those involved in eliminating Bedaki's and Abdullo's groups. The resistance was not a group of regional Islamic militants who crossed over from Afghanistan, but former opposition commanders (Abdullo refused to recognize the agreement that ended the Civil War) with a small group of followers. This was also not an insurgency across the Rasht District with a population violently opposed to the government.⁵⁵ Neither of the former opposition commanders had the resources to threaten the capital, nor was that their goal. Despite some setbacks and problems in the operation, Tajik military and security forces demonstrated their ability to eliminate a group of a few dozen militants.

Despite concerns that the Taliban or other militants groups in Afghanistan will spread north into Central Asia, this has yet to happen on a scale that would threaten Tajikistan's security.⁵⁶ The few prisoners arrested in Afghanistan, and later extradited, prove that there is a connection between criminals or militants in the two countries. There was a suicide bombing at a police station in the city of Khujand on September 3, 2010, although this attack is not likely connected a transnational group.⁵⁷ However, there have been no other terrorist attacks since then, and the 2010-11 violence in Tajikistan is not much different than past incidents where government forces clashed with former opposition commanders. The last time a group of

militants crossed Tajikistan's borders from Afghanistan with little difficulty was in 2000, when the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan came back to use Tajikistan as a starting point for conducting incursions into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.⁵⁸

Ultimately, the events of 2010-11 demonstrate that while Tajikistan's military and security forces have not reached a pinnacle in their development, they are improving their capabilities in combating small groups of militants and tracking down criminals. A larger, better trained and equipped militant group than Bedaki's or Abdullo's, however, would present a more formidable threat to Tajikistan's security. Such a group would need to have a more significant level of support from the population than Bedaki or Abdullo had. Based on past incidents, future threats or violence in Tajikistan would likely come from internal dynamics and problems. If, or when, this happens, Tajikistan's military and security forces will be better prepared to combat them.

Notes

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⁵ Dov Lynch, "The Tajik Civil War and Peace Process," *Civil Wars* 4, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 62.

⁶ Roger N. McDermott, "The Army In Tajikistan: Ten Years of Independence," *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst*, March 12, 2003, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/292>, (accessed May 22, 2012); Vladimir Paramonov and Oleg Stolpovski, "Russia and Central Asia: Bilateral Cooperation in the Defense Sector," *Advanced Research and Assessment Group, Central Asian Series* 08/15(E) (May 2008): 9, <http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/ca/08%2815%29VPEnglish.pdf/view>, (accessed May 22, 2012); Lynch, "The Tajik Civil War and Peace Process," (2001): 57-58; Lena Johnson, *Tajikistan in the New Central Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press), 40-48.

⁷ "Tajikistan, Chapter Six: Asia," *The Military Balance* 112, number 1 (March 7, 2012): 285; Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment – Russia and the CIS, "Tajikistan, Procurement," March 22, 2012; Roger McDermott, "Border Security in Tajikistan: Countering the Narcotics Trade?," *Conflict Studies Research Centre* K36 (October 2002), <http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/ca/K36/view>, (accessed June 4, 2012); Paramonov and Stolpovski, "Russia and Central Asia: Bilateral Cooperation in the Defense Sector," 9-12.

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