

Tajikistan: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

On May 19, 2019, a prison riot broke out in Vakhdat, Tajikistan, claiming the lives of 29 inmates and three prison guards. Although the Tajik government has offered limited information about the perpetrators, ISIS has claimed responsibility for the attack. The riot was facilitated by a group of ISIS-affiliated inmates armed with knives, and among those killed were prominent members of the outlawed Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) and a prominent anti-government cleric. One of the instigators of the riot was Bekhruz Gulmurod, the son of [Gulmurod Khalimov](#) [1], a former senior official in the Tajik military who notoriously denounced the Tajik Special Forces when he defected to ISIS in 2015. In a similar event on November 7, 2018, a prison riot left at least 27 people dead—although non-governmental sources have said the figure is closer to 50—in Khujand with ISIS claiming one of its fighters as responsible for initiating the riot. The Khujand prison often holds prisoners convicted of terrorism, religious extremism and other serious offenses. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [2], [Al Jazeera](#) [3], [EIU](#) [4], [New York Times](#) [5], [Radio Free Europe](#) [6], [France 24](#) [7], [Radio Free Europe](#) [8], [Radio Free Europe](#) [9])

Less than a year earlier on July 29, 2018, seven tourists were cycling near Danghara in southern Tajikistan when five terrorists deliberately ran the foreigners over with a vehicle. The death of four of the seven cyclists—two Americans, a Dutchman, and a Swiss man—drew international attention towards the rise of ISIS throughout both the country and the Central Asian region. Two other cyclists—one Swiss and one Dutch—were admitted to the hospital in critical condition while one cyclist—a Frenchman—escaped without injury. Although Tajik authorities tried to blame the attack on the IRPT, ISIS later claimed responsibility by releasing a video of the five attackers pledging their allegiance to the Islamic State. (Sources: [New York Times](#) [10], [Washington Post](#) [11], [France24](#) [12])

Overview

Tajikistan is a landlocked country which shares borders with China, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and most notably, Afghanistan, making the country vulnerable to insurgent spillover that plagues its neighbor. Although Tajikistan has been relatively free from large-scale extremist attacks, the country is the second largest exporter of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria in the Central Asian region due to the central government's mishandling of the country's social, economic, and political affairs. (Sources: [Voices on Central Asia](#) [13], [Soufan Center](#) [14], [EIU](#) [15])

Shortly after Tajikistan declared independence from the Soviet Union in September 1991, the country quickly devolved into a civil war that lasted from 1992 until 1997. The conflict between the secular government—led by paramilitary chiefs and backed by Russian forces—and the United Tajik Opposition (UTO)—comprised of a coalition of democratic, Islamic, and local ethnic groups—resulted in over 157,000 casualties and displaced more than 1.5 million people. During the height of the war in 1992, Emomali Rahmon was voted president and has ruled the country ever since. The crisis between Rahmon's administration and the religious opposition continues to plague the country as the administration has chosen to vilify public displays of religiosity. The government has placed stringent limitations on religious expression and has exercised tight control over mosques and imams in the Muslim-majority country. The government-controlled Council of the Ulema and the State Committee for Religious Affairs appoints every imam and cleric and designates where and when mosques can be established. Additionally, the country has imposed a state approved version of Islam which enforces beard-shaving, the prohibition of wearing a hijab, and age-regulations regarding who can attend Mosque or perform hajj. Furthermore, Rahmon continues to shut down madrassas as well as order the return of Tajik nationals studying abroad at Islamic institutions under the belief that the religiously-guided institutions idealize extremist activity. Despite cracking down on religious education, the government has not made any effort in constructing alternative institutions for its school-aged demographics. According to Muhammadrahim Abdumannonov, a Khujand-based expert on Tajik social issues, the prevention of Islamic teaching may deprive young groups from learning ethical morals and norms and could potentially make them more vulnerable to extremist recruitment. According to Human Rights First, Dushanbe's policies toward religious traditions and attire stems from the central government's conflation of religiosity and "outward signs of radicalism." Under the guise of national security, the Rahmon administration has exploited the regulation of religious expression as a way to bolster state control over public affairs and spaces. (Sources: [Radio Free Europe](#) [16], [Radio Free Europe](#) [17] [Jamestown Foundation](#) [18], [Human Rights First](#) [19])

The end of the Tajik Civil War in 1997 brokered the General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord, which ensures peace and security, free and fair elections, a multi-party system, and freedom of speech with an independent media. As of 2016, the constitution grants Rahmon the right to indefinite terms. According to Freedom House,

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Tajikistan currently ranks 11/100 in terms of freedom status. Among many other human rights violations, the government strictly limits freedom of expression and assembly, opposition party candidates are often persecuted, and court proceedings “rarely follow the rule of law as nearly all defendants are found guilty...[and] arbitrary arrests are common.” Although Rahmon’s administration has endorsed anti-Islam policies, Tajikistan was the only country in Central Asia in which an Islamist political party was legally allowed to operate. However, in 2015, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) lost representation in the government because it failed to meet membership quotas. The party was then designated as a terrorist organization after the government alleged that the political party was involved in orchestrating an anti-government rebellion that resulted in two deadly attacks in Vakhdat and Dushanbe. In 2019, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) designated Tajikistan as a “Country of Particular Concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. (Sources: [Guardian](#) [20], [Freedom House](#) [21], [Human Rights First](#) [22], [U.S. Department of State](#) [23], [University of Notre Dame](#) [24], [Soufan Center](#) [25], [Diplomat](#) [26], [Columbia University](#) [27], [USCIRF](#) [28])

Given that Tajikistan’s geographic neighbors have dealt with heightened levels of extremist activity and recruitment, particularly with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Dushanbe adopted the Law on Combating Terrorism in 1999, and has since made a series of amendments, including one in 2017. However, the central government has used counterterrorism efforts as a way to further stymie political opposition and social dissent. The drastic limitations on religious freedom have persuaded some citizens to seek out alternative representation, in the form of extremist actors, to upend the current administration. Furthermore, unemployment is rampant in Tajikistan with 29.5 percent of the population living in poverty and 14 percent living in extreme poverty, a reality which has factored into the extremist recruitment strategy. Given that large numbers of Tajiks move to Russia in search of employment opportunities, most of the recruitment takes place in Russia where Tajiks work as migrant laborers. The lack of socioeconomic opportunity in conjunction with the repressive political environment has made the country and its nationals symptomatic of extremist recruitment. (Sources: [Radio Free Europe](#) [29], [Middle East Institute](#) [30], [Refworld](#) [31], [WFP](#) [32])

Radicalization and Foreign Fighters

In Central Asia, Tajikistan has produced the second largest number of foreign fighters per capita, with over 1,300 Tajiks traveling abroad to join extremist insurgencies in Iraq and Syria. Given the ease in which illicit activity moves throughout the Central Asian region due to porous and unenforced borders, it is possible that radicalized Tajiks could help prop up extremist cells on both domestic and international soil. (Sources: [Soufan Center](#) [25], [Stratfor](#) [33])

Although Prosecutor-General Yusuf Ahmadzod claims that the majority of Tajik foreign fighters are Salafists, data produced by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism suggests that radicalization is not contingent on a recruit’s former piety. ICCT’s data revealed that conservative and religious regions have had fewer people convicted for terrorism related charges and lack of income tends to be the primary motivating force in radicalization. Extremist sentiment and membership is more likely among migrant labor workers, with over 85 percent of Tajik fighters in Iraq and Syria having been migrant workers in Russia. Given the lack of employment opportunities in Tajikistan, Tajiks often migrate to Russia in search of employment. When resettled, they grapple with racism and feelings of insignificance, which extremists have leveraged for recruitment purposes. ISIS recruiters often target individuals who are socially isolated or who have experienced a degree of trauma and are searching for validation and community support. The ostracization and harassment the migrants face in Russia is conducive to extremist recruitment as radicalized individuals provide a narrative of significance and impact that convincingly sways dispirited demographics. (Sources: [International Centre for Counter-Terrorism](#) [34], [Radio Free Europe](#) [29], [Silk Road News](#) [35], [UNDP](#) [36])

ISIS

More than 1,300 Tajiks are currently fighting in Iraq and Syria with Tajikistan ranking as the world’s leading exporter of suicide bombers to ISIS. It is suspected that Tajiks are being singled out as suicide bombers since [Gulmurod Khalimov](#) [1], ISIS’s highest military authority, was a Tajik national. Khalimov, an American-trained former head of Tajikistan’s elite security force, defected to ISIS in 2015 where he was quickly appointed to minister of war before being targeted and killed in an airstrike in Mosul in April 2017. Khalimov’s defection represented a security threat for Tajikistan, but also demonstrated the risk to international actors of providing unrestricted U.S. security assistance to failing states. (Sources: [Global Risk Insights](#) [37], [Radio Free Europe](#) [29], [International Centre for Counter-Terrorism](#) [34], [Carnegie Endowment](#)

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[38])

The hit-and-run attack of seven cyclists in July 2018 in Danghara was the first ISIS-sponsored attack in Tajikistan that garnered significant international attention. Four cyclists were killed—two American, one Swiss, and one Dutch—while two cyclists of Swiss and Dutch nationality were injured, and one Frenchman managed to escape without injury. The seven tourists were cycling down a rural road when a sedan carrying five assailants rammed into the group, stopping to get out and stab the tourists, and then returning the vehicle to run over the group once more. ISIS’s Amaq News Agency said that the assailants were “soldiers of the Islamic State” and the attack was “in response to calls to target citizens of Coalition countries.” Tajik security services killed four people suspected in the attack, detained the alleged leader of the terrorist cell Hussein Abdusamadov, arrested five men for failing to notify authorities of a possible crime, and ordered 20 Tajik migrant workers in Russia to return home for questioning. Although ISIS had claimed to be operating in Tajikistan for quite some time, the attacks they claimed were often the work of individuals unaffiliated with the network. This attack was the first to be publicly claimed by the group and corroborated by official sources. The intentionality behind attacking western nationals worked to further validate ISIS as a legitimate threat to both Central Asian as well as international security. (Sources: [NPR](#) [39], [New York Times](#) [10], [Washington Post](#) [40], [Radio Free Europe](#) [41])

ISIS-claimed attacks in Tajikistan have been in line with the group’s operations in other countries in terms of carrying out small scale suicide bombings and shootings. However, within the past year, ISIS has amended their attack style and infiltrated the prison system with members inciting fatal riots. The two prison riots in November 2018 and May 2019 resulted in over 27 and 32 casualties, respectively. However, Tajik authorities have been vague in offering information about both riots. This has sparked some debate as to whether the central government was involved in the riot since four of the inmates killed were former IRPT members and a prominent cleric who was vocal in his anti-government beliefs. (Sources: [Al Jazeera](#) [3], [BBC News](#) [42], [Reuters](#) [43], [France 24](#) [7], [Radio Free Europe](#) [44])

Furthermore, Tajik members of ISIS have plotted and provided information for attacks throughout Europe over the years. In February 2018, a Russian court sentenced six Tajik nationals, all migrant laborers, to prison terms ranging from 12 to 16 years. The six defendants planned to bomb a minibus outside of Moscow in 2016. Also in February 2018, it was discovered that Rakhmat Akilov—an Uzbek national who stole a truck and plowed into a crowd of people in Stockholm in 2017—was reportedly in contact with Tajik members of ISIS. (Sources: [Radio Free Europe](#) [45], [Radio Free Europe](#) [46])

Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan

Established in 1990, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) was the successor to the Islamist wing of an opposition bloc that fought against Rahmon’s government during the civil war. Following the war, the IRPT was the country’s only opposition party and boasted more than 40,000 supporters. According to the IRPT platform, the party promoted a democratic government and endorsed the compulsory study of Islamic education and traditions throughout civil society. Despite being the only legally recognized Islamist party in Central Asian politics, the IRPT lost representation in 2015 and was quickly designated as a terrorist organization. The government alleged that the political party was involved in orchestrating an anti-government rebellion that resulted in two deadly attacks at a security service arsenal in Dushanbe and a police station in Vakhdat in September of 2015. The accusations that IRPT was behind the failed coup of 2015 were never substantiated, but the Tajik High Court was quick to ban the party on grounds of not meeting membership quotas following the 2015 general election. It is reported that the elections were highly rigged, as observers recorded a number of violations on election day which included multiple voting and ballot stuffing. At its height, IRPT gained 30 percent of government positions and towards the end of its reign, the IRPT only held two seats in their parliament’s 63-seat lower house. However, given their continued support from the public, they were considered enough of a threat to the Rahmon administration to be targeted. (Sources: [Conciliation Resources](#) [47], [Hizbi Nahzati Islami Tajikistan](#) [48], [Freedom House](#) [49], [Refworld](#) [50], [Columbia University](#) [27])

Despite the General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord, which guaranteed a multiparty system, IRPT members were often targeted and harassed by members of the ruling party under the suspicion that they were advocating for and supporting extremist activity. According to the International Crisis Group, security services often conflated ISIS and IRPT and even claimed that nearly 500 Tajik fighters in Iraq or Syria were former members of the IRPT. On August 2, 2018, 14 members of the IRPT were sentenced to terms ranging from seven to 26 years after the government asserted that the members trained in Afghanistan with ISIS and planned to blow up strategically important sites and foreign diplomatic missions in Dushanbe. The entire trial was held in great secrecy which made it impossible for human

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rights groups to verify the credibility of the state's case against the defendants. (Sources: [Refworld](#) [50], [Columbia](#) [27], [Al Jazeera](#) [51], [Freedom Now](#) [52], [Freedom House](#) [53], [OSCE](#) [54], [Open Democracy](#) [55], [EIU](#) [56], [Eurasianet](#) [57])

The event that catalyzed IRPT's decline took place on September 4, 2015, when Deputy Defense Minister General Abduhalim Nazarzoda attempted to overthrow the government. Nazarzoda, along with 130 supporters, instigated two attacks at police checkpoints in Dushanbe and Vakhdat. The attacks killed at least 35 people, with senior government officials claiming that Nazarzoda was acting under the instruction of the IRPT. Nazarzoda managed to flee the scene, but was killed in a counterinsurgent operation two weeks later. It is reported that Nazarzoda incited the conflict following rumors that Rahmon planned on firing him under the auspice of "committing a crime" as well as being an "Islamic State sympathizer." Rahmon was also quick to blame the IRPT for the attacks as Nazarzoda was the party's former field commander during the civil war. However, Nazarzoda disengaged from the IRPT following his appointment within the armed forces. Twelve senior IRPT leaders were arrested for their alleged involvement, although the government never managed to substantiate the accusations. On June 2, 2016, the Supreme Court sentenced the 12 IRPT leaders to sentences ranging from 14 years to life in prison. (Sources: [Diplomat](#) [58], [New York Times](#) [59], [Reuters](#) [60], [BBC News](#) [61], [Radio Free Europe](#) [62], [Radio Free Europe](#) [63], [The Jamestown Foundation](#) [64], [Freedom Now](#) [52])

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

Although the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) has focused its attentions against international forces in Afghanistan, the IMU has targeted Tajikistan. They are suspected of carrying out at least one suicide bombing outside of a police station in Tajikistan in September of 2010, which resulted in four casualties and 25 injuries. Once close to the Afghan Taliban, the IMU redirected their loyalty to ISIS in August 2015, which has not affected their popularity among anti-government guerillas in Central Asia. Recently, the IMU has been reported as exporting their salafi-jihadist ideology throughout Russia, which has resonated with Central Asian migrant laborers. In December of 2014, a court in Khujand convicted 11 IMU members who planned to fight in Syria. According to reports, all 11 men were Tajik nationals and had lived for long periods in Russia. (Sources: [Radio Free Europe](#) [65], [Stanford](#) [66], [United Nations](#) [67])

Timeline of Major Extremist and Terrorist Incidents

- **July 2019:**An Afghan court transfers eight Tajik nationals to Tajikistan to serve their prison sentences or face trial. Most were detained in Afghanistan on extremism or terrorism charges. Source: [Radio Free Europe](#) [68]
- **May 19, 2019:**A prison riot breaks out in Vakhdat, leaving 29 inmates and 3 prison guards dead. Sources: [New York Times](#) [5], [Guardian](#) [69]
- **November 21, 2018:**The Tajik High Court sentences Husein Abdusamadov, the main surviving suspect in the July 2018 hit-and-run attack, to life in prison. 14 other suspects are sentenced to prison terms ranging between one and 16 years. Source: [Radio Free Europe](#) [70]
- **November 13, 2018:**Tajik intelligence officials confirm that 12 ISIS supporters were detained before detonating explosives at a school and commander's office on Russia's 201st military base in Tajikistan. Source: [Stratfor](#) [71]
- **November 8, 2018:**A riot breaks out at a high-security prison in Khujand, killing 25 inmates and two security officers. ISIS claims responsibility for the attack. Source: [Guardian](#) [72]
- **August 2, 2018:**The Supreme Court sentences 14 members of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan to prison with terms ranging from seven to 26 years. The government claims the members trained in Afghanistan with ISIS and planned to blow up strategically important sites and foreign diplomatic missions in Dushanbe. Source: [Eurasianet](#) [57]
- **July 30, 2018:**Seven western cyclists are targeted in a hit-and-run attack perpetrated by ISIS. Four of the seven are killed. Source: [New York Times](#) [73]
- **February 22, 2018:**Moscow Regional Military Court sentences six Tajik nationals to prison after convicting them of plotting a terrorist attack in which they sought to bomb a Moscow minibus in 2016. Their terms range from 12 to 18 years. Source: [Radio Free Europe](#) [45]
- **February 9, 2018:**Swedish news agency TT discovers that Uzbek national Rakhmat Akilov was in contact with Tajik members of ISIS. In April of 2017, Akilov stole a truck and plowed into a crowd of people in Stockholm, killing five. Source: [Radio Free Europe](#) [46]
- **March 12, 2017:**Four men in Bokhtar planted an explosive device near the military prosecutor's office resulting in one casualty. The perpetrators are supposedly members of ISIS. Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [74]

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- **March 8, 2017:**A suicide bomber and gunmen, two of which are Tajik nationals and members of ISIS, attack a military hospital in Kabul, Afghanistan. The attack kills 49 people. Source: [Radio Free Europe](#) [29]
- **January 30, 2017:**An explosive device detonates on the outskirts of Bokhtar. The blast damages a vehicle, but no one is hurt. No group claims responsibility for the event. Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [74]
- **November 2016:**Tajikistan publishes its National Strategy on Countering Extremism and Terrorism of the Republic of Tajikistan for 2016-2020. Source: [UNRCCA](#) [75]
- **August 4, 2016:**Tajikistan sentences 170 people in the connection with the failed coup in September. The sentences range from one to 30 years and are based on charges of murder and membership in a criminal gang. Source: [Radio Free Europe](#) [76]
- **February 24, 2016:**The Ismoili Somoni district court sentences Zarina Sardova to 13 years in prison for disseminating videos calling on Tajik youth to join the jihad in Syria. Source: [Radio Free Europe](#) [77]
- **December 5, 2015:**Katlon regional court sentences eight residents of Shahrituz district to prison terms ranging from 7 to 27 years. The defendants had been in contact with fighters from Syria via the internet and were reportedly planning terrorist attacks in Tajikistan. Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [78]
- **September 29, 2015:**Tajikistan's Justice Ministry bans the country's leading opposition party, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). The High Court ruled on grounds of the IRPT failing to meet membership quotas, and later accuses party members of supporting Nazarzoda's coup as well as sharing the same goals as ISIS. Sources: [BBC News](#) [61], [Al Jazeera](#) [51], [Columbia University](#) [27]
- **September 4, 2015:**Deputy Defense Minister General Abduhalim Nazarzoda leads a group aimed at overthrowing the government, instigating two attacks on September 4 at a defense ministry building in Dushanbe and a police station in Vakhdat. The attacks kill at least 22 with Rahmon claiming the organizers were acting under the instruction of ISIS. Sources: [Diplomat](#) [58], [New York Times](#) [59], [Reuters](#) [60], [BBC News](#) [61], [Radio Free Europe](#) [62]
- **July 2015:**Dushanbe prevents a series of terrorist attacks that were planned to coincide with Ramadan celebrations. The terrorists, reportedly ISIS militants, planned to attack more than 10 police stations in Dushanbe, Kulob, Fayzobod, and Gharm. Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [78]
- **April 2015:**Gulmurod Khalimov, commander of OMON, an elite police unit, defects and joins ISIS. He quickly rises within ISIS's ranks to become minister of war. Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#) [78], [Guardian](#) [79]
- **December 19, 2014:**A court in Khujand convicts 11 Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) members who planned to fight in Syria. According to reports, all 11 men were Tajik nationals and had lived for long periods in Russia. Source: [Radio Free Europe](#) [80]
- **September 3, 2010:**Two suicide bombers detonate a vehicle within the Sughd regional police headquarters. Four people were killed and 25 were wounded. No group claimed responsibility, although the IMU is believed to be behind it. Source: [Radio Free Europe](#) [81]
- **June 13, 2005:**A bomb explodes near the Ministry of Emergency Situations and Civil Defense in Dushanbe. There are no casualties, but the attack is suspected to be perpetrated by Hizb ut-Tahrir. Source: [Radio Free Europe](#) [82]
- **June 27, 1997:**President Emomali Rahmon and Islamic opposition leader Said Abdullo Nuri sign a peace agreement to bring a formal end to the Tajik Civil War. Source: [Radio Free Europe](#) [83]

Domestic Counter-Extremism

Over the past decade, Tajikistan has been proactive in passing a series of counterterrorism laws. The Law on Combating Terrorism was passed in 1999 and the Law on the Fight Against Extremism was passed in 2003. However, the laws were riddled with unclear terminology and ambiguous enforcement procedures which the Rahmon administration exploited to actively suppress its opposition: journalists, politicians, and representatives of peaceful religious organizations. According to the law, any individual or group suspected of "subverting the constitutional order in the country" could be subject to arrest. In 2006, President Rahmon issued a decree that introduced the "Unified Concept of the Republic of Tajikistan on the Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism." The decree featured the phrase "terrorism and other forms of extremist manifestation" but did not elaborate on the meaning of either "extremism" or "terrorism." (Sources: [Legislationline](#) [84], [Library of Congress](#) [85])

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In 2015, amendments were made to the Law on Combating Terrorism. The amendments authorize blocking Internet and telecommunications systems during “counterterrorism operations.” The government has also implemented sweeping censorship laws in July of 2017 that have drastically restricted freedom of expression and access to information. The new legislation grants the police and security services new powers to obtain information about Internet sites visited by individuals. With over 1.5 million Internet users in Tajikistan, the law was proposed as some officials claimed that over 80 percent of Internet users accessed sites with extremist propaganda and content. According to the *Economist*, the new law essentially grants police and security services the right to arrest citizens for simply “liking” or viewing content that features extremist activity. (Sources: [Amnesty International](#) [86], [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) [56], [OHCHR](#) [87])

The State Committee for National Security (GKNB) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) are Tajikistan’s primary counterterrorism agencies. The GKNB and MVD have received training and equipment from the United States, Russia, and China, and both agencies are equipped with special tactical units that handle counterterrorism strategy. However, according to the International Crisis Group, it is unlikely that Tajikistan’s counterinsurgency unit—which employs about 30 soldiers—could effectively neutralize extremist forces. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#) [74], [International Crisis Group](#) [88])

In an effort to expand their Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) policies, Tajikistan has made inroads in rehabilitating former radicals. As seen in their amendments to its criminal laws in 2015, Tajikistan now offers some amnesty to former extremists. Fighters who voluntarily return home, renounce militant groups, and have not taken part in violence are authorized a pardon although they will remain on government watch lists. As of December 2018, more than 111 Tajiks have returned home after having joined extremist groups abroad. However, efforts to rehabilitate extremists has not been consistent with recidivism rates hovering around 50 percent. On February 2, 2018, Qudratullo Nazarzoda, the regional police chief of Sughd, told reporters that 34 former extremists have gone back to Iraq and Syria. The 34 were originally from a group of 72 returnees who were pardoned under the amended criminal laws of 2015. Of the 72, all but one were pardoned to resume civilian life. Authorities are still investigating one man they believe tried to recruit fighters on his return to Tajikistan. (Sources: [Radio Free Europe](#) [89], [European Eye on Radicalization](#) [90], [Radio Free Europe](#) [91])

International Counter-Extremism

Tajikistan has been willing to meet with international actors and has been the host to a variety of high-level, international meetings on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE). In June 2016, Dushanbe hosted UNDP’s “High-Level Experts Meeting on Framing Development Solutions for the Prevention of Violent Extremism.” Additionally, the United Nation’s Counter Terrorism Executive Directorate conducted a six-day assessment visit to Tajikistan in February 2017 as well as held a high-level international conference on countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism in May 2018. The discussions at each event focused on legislation and judicial practice, counter-financing of terrorism, law enforcement, border control, international cooperation, countering violent extremism that leads to terrorism, the role of women in CVE/PVE practices, and the need for rule-of-law-based responses to terrorism. (Sources: [UNDP](#) [92], [Refworld](#) [31], [CTED](#) [93], [CTED](#) [94])

Tajikistan, with support from the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE), published its “National Strategy on Countering Extremism and Terrorism of the Republic of Tajikistan” in late 2016. The strategy, which will be implemented from 2016-2020, combats radicalization and violence through both national and local governmental channels. The government has also implemented U.S.-sponsored community policing programs, and representatives of Tajikistan’s Ulema Council have been meeting with labor migrants in Russia to explain the dangers of radicalization among Tajik migrants. The majority of the strategy focuses on increasing community resilience and economic opportunities for Tajiks. (Sources: [UNRCCA](#) [75], [Refworld](#) [31])

Tajikistan has also made efforts to strengthen counterterrorism response and regional security through participation in intergovernmental security alliances such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Additionally, Moscow and Beijing have increased their security presence in the region given the increased terrorist threat in Tajikistan. In order to protect their economic and security interests in the Central Asian region, it is reported that China has established a military base near Murghab and that in May 2017, Russia partnered with Tajikistan in various counterterrorism military exercises and information sharing sessions that were sponsored by the Commonwealth of Independent States Counter-Terrorism Center. Moscow has also provided significant military aid to Tajikistan to help

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protect the border, citing the growing presence of ISIS in the Khorasan Province in Afghanistan. (Sources: [UNDP](#) [92], [U.S. Department of State](#) [74], [Jamestown Foundation](#) [95], [Refworld](#) [31])