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Tajikistan civil war shows folly of geopolitics

by Gabriele Liebig

Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, during his quite jarring speech at the signing of the accord granting autonomy to Gaza and Jericho in Washington, made reference to the civil war in Tajikistan. "It is an irony," he said, "that at a time when the Mideast peace process is moving ahead . . . other forces are endangering security in the region. Three days ago, I was in Kabul, Afghanistan, and at the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border. Even there, we can see these forces of subversion, terrorism, and extremism—religious and nonreligious forces, political extremism—which are doing their destructive work. I know that there are signs of this new danger in other parts of the region. And I hope that in our efforts we do not limit ourselves to peace between Israel and its neighbors and the cause of the Palestinians, who are striving to secure their legitimate rights, but that we will keep watch over the stability of the whole region. For these tasks, Russia will be a true and resolute lord-protector."

Kozyrev's words do not put Russia's new foreign policy in a very good light. They also reflect recent agreements between the two superpowers—the United States, and Russia as the neo-imperial successor of the Soviet Union. This superpower condominium, the so-called New Yalta, reached its first high point under Gorbachov. Kozyrev outlined quite unmistakably the "new danger" of Islamic fundamentalism, as a shared enemy image. And he made it quite clear that all efforts to counteract this danger in Tajikistan and Afghanistan, must remain in the sphere of influence of the eastern "lord-protector."

The Yeltsin government now seems to be seeking its salvation through the worst possible combination of extreme,

destabilizing shock therapy and neo-imperial restoration of the former Soviet spheres of influence. This policy is doomed to failure; but for the moment, one has to proceed on the assumption that the Moscow government intends to compensate for the lack of coherence in its economic policy by being all the more ruthless in its political power plays against the other republics of the former Soviet Union.

Tajikistan (see map, p. 57) is an especially tragic example of this. In December 1992, the coalition government there, which included the Democratic Party and the Islamic Renewal Party, was overthrown after only eight months in office. Tajikistan descended into a bloody civil war. Both the Uzbek and Russian sides apparently made use of one particular clan, since, remarkably, all of the members of the new communist government come from the same Kulyab region.

The pro-Moscow government, under President of the Parliament Emomali Rakhmonov (who had heretofore been an insignificant communist apparatchik), persecuted the opposition with unspeakable brutality. All opposition parties were banned, and their leadership imprisoned. Thirty-seven newspapers had to stop publishing, 20 journalists were killed, 40 disappeared without a trace, and 10 more are now in prison.

But that was not the end of it. As one of its first acts in office, Rakhmonov's communist regime turned over the persecution of "terrorists" and other police responsibilities to the so-called People's Front, a paramilitary band, similar to the Serbian Chetniks in Bosnia and Croatia, under the leadership of the notorious gangster Sangak Safarov, who had spent 23 years in Soviet prisons for murder and other

crimes. Safarov's "troops" had already proven their mettle in the armed storming of Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe on Oct. 24, 1992, which still did not succeed in collapsing the coalition under President Akbarscho Iskandarov, but did claim many civilian casualties.

The arrests and shootings carried out by Safarov's People's Front were directed primarily against people from the mountainous eastern Tajik regions of Badakhshan and Garm, which were the opposition's strongholds. In the last elections in November 1991, the majority vote in these regions went to the opposition parties. The organizations Helsinki Watch and Amnesty International have documented the progress of the alleged battle against the opposition's "terrorism." Safarov's people, or agents of the Interior Ministry, sweep through homes, buses, or public squares conducting "passport checks." Anyone they find from the above-named regions is immediately seized. Often, the abused corpses of these people turn up later on. Some 300 shootings have been documented, but the actual number must be higher than that. Anyone who resists is shot on the spot. Countless people have disappeared without a trace. There are also reports of horrible torture. There are many indications that the brunt of these purges has been borne by Tajikistan's intellectual upper crust, who were recruited from among the generally well-educated Badakhshanis (see *Documentation*).

The civil war has already claimed 100,000 casualties. Of the 800,000 who have had to flee their homes, some have gone to other Tajik regions, while others have gone abroad to Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, or Russia. Quite a few Tajikistani refugees are also living in Moscow. This fact, along with the harsh criticism of official Tajikistan policy expressed by the Yeltsin government in such democratic papers as *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, sheds light on the completely unresolved political situation inside Russia.

The making of a civil war

The prehistory of the Tajikistan civil war is closely tied with the past year's events in Moscow. Tajikistan was the poorest of the Soviet republics, largely because of its geography: Some 93% of its territory is covered by mountains, some of them over 3,000 meters high. Its highest mountains bear the anachronistic names Lenin Peak (7,134 m) and Communism Peak (7,495 m). The country's approximately 5 million population is comprised of 59% Tajiks, 23% Uzbeks, and up to 10% Russians. As early as 1990, the bad economic situation had sparked unrest. The Soviet Union was on the way out, and in August 1990 Tajikistan declared its sovereignty and the precedence of Tajikistan laws over those of the U.S.S.R.

Then came the August 1991 putsch in Moscow. The Tajik leader Makhkamov made the mistake of taking sides with the those who carried out the coup, and so he was forced out after it was defeated. In September 1991, Tajikistan, along

with many other republics, declared independence, and the Communist Party was outlawed. The communists in the Tajikistan Supreme Soviet attempted to have the ban revoked and a state of emergency declared, but their putsch failed, thanks to mass sit-ins by the politically mobilized residents of Dushanbe. The Communist Party renamed itself the Socialist Party, but then reverted back to its original name in January 1992.

Multi-party presidential elections were held in November 1991, out of which the old communist Rakhman Nabiyev emerged as the victor. Nabiyev, an expert political chameleon, made clever use of the fact that Gorbachov had had him deposed back in 1985. Nevertheless, the opposition won the majority in the eastern mountain regions of Badakhshan.

Many in the country would simply not tolerate the prospect of a new era of communist domination, and in May 1992 a series of mass demonstrations and battles broke out between partisans and opponents of Nabiyev, which only subsided when Nabiyev announced he was prepared to enter into a coalition government with the Democratic Party and the Islamic Renewal Party. Things initially went well in Dushanbe after that: The country was not "Islamicized," as Russian and Uzbek propaganda had claimed it would be, nor was there even the slightest offense against the Russians living in Tajikistan during the entire reign of the coalition government.

Uzbekistan joins the fray

Meanwhile, in neighboring Uzbekistan, the totalitarian communist dictator Islam Karimov began to fear that this victory of the Tajikistan opposition might also put wind into the sails of his own domestic opposition. Karimov would have most preferred to launch a military intervention of all the other Central Asian republics against Tajikistan, but this scheme failed because of the opposition of the Kyrgyztan head of state Akar Akayev. So he resorted instead to waging irregular warfare: The Kulyab clans, especially that of Sangak Safarov, were mobilized to fight for the restoration of Nabiyev to sole power. The summer of 1992 saw fierce battles between Kulyab and another city, Kurgan-Tyube, resulting in great losses on both sides. Safarov received arms and logistical support from Uzbekistan, as well as from the 201st Russian Artillery Division which was stationed in Tajikistan.

Nabiyev, who had been playing both sides, was forced to resign in September 1992. He died shortly thereafter. In November, his successor, Akbarscho Iskandarov, attempted to end the civil war by submitting his resignation. The parliament, which was still dominated by the communists, installed Emomali Rakhmonov as president of parliament and head of state, which escalated the civil war still further. On Dec. 10, with Russian backing, the communists retook Dushanbe.

Afghanistan, too

It is unclear at what point Afghanistan also began to get involved in the conflict. Of the 800,000 people uprooted by the warfare, about 100,000 fled southward into Afghanistan. They are living in terrible conditions, in tent cities, because Afghanistan itself is also torn by civil strife. In July, when a couple hundred Tajikistani refugees wanted to return home and got into a skirmish with Russian border troops, the world press babbled about an "Afghan invasion." Not only in Russia, but also in the United States, Afghanistan is still considered to be the arms supplier and logistical backup of the "Islamic" resistance in Tajikistan. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Afghan Mujaheddin are also said to be fighting within Tajikistan's territory against the communists in Dushanbe.

The importance of Hekmatyar's terrorist gangs is not to be underestimated, and it is quite conceivable that they are indeed intervening into the Tajikistan civil war as a "counterbalance" against Safarov's killer gangs. What is astonishing, however, is that the United States is still maintaining secret intelligence ties to Hekmatyar's anti-communist Mujaheddin, while at the same time giving financial assistance to the Rakhmonov regime. At a press conference, the U.S. ambassador to Uzbekistan announced that his government was supporting the Dushanbe regime with \$35 million, with another \$31 million to follow. And when Sangak Safarov died—a drinking partner is said to have murdered him during a bacchanal—American officials were among those who co-signed his obituary.

The Russian-Tajikistan pact

On July 15, 1993, the Russian parliament ratified a Russian-Tajikistan pact of friendship, cooperation, and mutual assistance. The pact had been signed in the Kremlin on May 25, and was especially focused on securing Russian military support for the Tajikistan regime. On May 27, the Russian military newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda*, under the headline "Russia and Tajikistan Together Again," wrote that "the agreement foresees a common policy in the areas of defense and military technology, including the financing of military programs and arms purchases. In the event of any act of aggression against either partner, the other partner will offer the necessary support. . . . For a transitional period, and until Tajikistan has its own border guard, it accedes the right to protect its own borders, as well as those of Russia and the CIS, to the Russian border troops."

Already before that, during the spring, the 201st Division of the Russian Army was being considerably beefed up. At the signing ceremony in May, Rakhmonov expressed his thanks: "The presence of the 201st Russian Division in Tajikistan is a guarantee of peace. . . . Without Russia and Boris Yeltsin personally, Tajikistan would have already ceased to exist."

But the Russian-Tajikistan agreement was not universal-

ly welcomed in Moscow. The weekly *Moscow News*, in its May 23-30 issue on the eve of the signing of the agreement, printed on its front page a letter from the Tajikistani opposition to President Yeltsin in which they protest against Russian backing for a regime which has so flagrantly trodden human rights underfoot. Even harsher criticism came from *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, which on May 27 published an article, "Will Russia Be Drawn into a New War? The Pact with Dushanbe Could Lead to a Second Afghanistan." The article reads in part: "Russian military circles are convinced that the situation in Tajikistan could easily develop into a carbon-copy of Afghanistan: Russian troops in the valleys, and partisans—some of them Afghans—on the mountaintops. Russia's war against Afghanistan showed what happens under those circumstances. With the signing of a document on joint military operations, Russia will be inexorably drawn into a broader war from which it has nothing to gain." Moreover, the article says, the pact will strengthen the Tajikistan regime, which surely will not help improve the human rights situation there.

Even many of the Russian soldiers stationed in Tajikistan are beginning to wonder whether they are going to be goaded into a new Afghanistan disaster. Some soldiers are said to have refused to carry out orders; some are even said to have been shot by their officers. The Tajikistan regime is therefore reportedly relying more on Russian "volunteers," i.e., soldiers who are paid a wage of 600,000 rubles. When one considers that the average income in Tajikistan is 5,000-6,000 rubles, and that only two or three working family members must support a family of 12-15, then one can easily imagine that neither Moscow nor the regime in Dushanbe is winning much endearment from the populace.

Russia's strategic interests in Tajikistan

Numerous reasons are being cited for Moscow's controversial support for the communist regime in Dushanbe; but none of them has the ring of truth.

It is certainly legitimate for the Russian government to consider itself duty-bound to protect Russians living in Tajikistan. But it was not legitimate for Russia to support the toppling of an Islamic-Democratic government which has done no harm to any Tajikistani Russian.

Second, it is argued that the Russian Army is in Tajikistan in order to mediate and to secure peace and stability in the Tajikistan-Afghanistan region. But one could counter that, without the 201st Division's support for the "Popular Front" of the criminal Safarov, the civil war probably would never have escalated to its present point. Why didn't Yeltsin support the Democratic-Islamic transitional government? Russian support for the hated regime in Dushanbe is certainly no prescription for peace in the region, but rather ensures the continuation of a war which may also draw in Afghanistan and Uzbekistan.

Third, uranium is mined in Tajikistan, and Moscow fears

that an independent government in Dushanbe might sell enriched uranium to Iran, a country with which Tajikistan shares a rich cultural heritage. But does that justify a war which has already cost hundreds of thousands of lives?

But the chief argument advanced by the backers of the pact, is to equate the fight against the Tajikistani opposition with the fight against the demons of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism, as Kozyrev formulated it in Washington. One couldn't possibly make a worse error, since it means actually *creating* the problem that one is trying to remedy.

A cultured people

It ought to be clear that not every Muslim is an Islamist, and that not every Islamist or fundamentalist is a terrorist. I would like to emphasize that among all the representatives of the democratic Tajikistani opposition whom I have met, not a single one could even be described as an Islamist. Rather, I met highly educated people of Muslim cultural background, responsible representatives of Tajikistan's intellectual upper crust, who are being persecuted, murdered, or driven out of the country by the communist regime, with catastrophic consequences.

"It is simply ludicrous to demonize the Tajikistani opposition as fundamentalists," remarked Sadi Shodvonov. He and his friends are the best proof of this, along with his young wife, a mother of two, who nonetheless looks nothing like a housewife, but rather, with her denim skirt, tee-shirt and bouncy pony-tail, resembles a western college student. For supper there is Tajik pilaf, and over the course of the evening copious quantities of Armenian cognac are imbibed. Concerning this point of alcohol consumption, not even the Koran expressed a clear opinion, not to mention the writings of such great Persian-Islamic poets as Omar Khayyam and Firdusi.

Sadi considers himself as completely Muslim, but in no way thinks of himself as a fundamentalist. We speak about the Islamic renaissance, about the cultural high-point of the region which today comprises Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and the great Islamic scholars Ibn Sina (Avicenna), al-Farabi, and the Persian poet and philosopher Saadi (1215-92). "Under the Bolsheviks, nobody except a few scholars had access to such works," reports Sadi. "And unfortunately, the Islamists today don't want to know anything about them. They regard Ibn Sina as an 'infidel,' because as a doctor he allegedly acted against the will of Allah."

But against all the Russian and Uzbek propaganda in Tajikistan, the Islamists are only a small minority. The Islamic Renewal Party has about 20,000 members. Over the past few months, about 100,000 Tajiks have fled southward into Afghanistan, but even the majority of these aren't fundamentalists. "Someone who must save his own life often doesn't have to luxury to choose where he's going to flee."

The true philosophy of Islam is becoming the victim of

deliberately distorted propaganda. Sadi clothes his meaning in a story: "A man owns a single sheep and wants to sell it at the market. No sooner does he reach the next street corner, than someone asks him: 'Where are you going with that pig?' When he reaches the riverbank, the ferryman likewise asks him what he intends to do with his pig. And when he arrives at the market, a gang of ruffians greets him with gales of laughter, because he has dared to show up there with a pig. Uncertain of himself and of his sheep, the man gives up, leaving his sheep for the bandits."

Sadi, his friends, and their wives are happy that the Schiller Institute of Lyndon and Helga LaRouche is seeking to establish a Christian-Islamic dialogue, an ecumenical policy on the basis of joint economic development and a universal image of man which gives a central position to man's creative reason in the sense of *imago viva Dei*. The Persian-Tajik philosopher Saadi, he reports, has written much about the meaning of human life, about the ideal state and how it is to be realized. Chauvinism and narrow-mindedness are alien to him. A good man must intervene for the good of *all* human beings, for people are like parts of a single body: Whenever one suffers pain, the others suffer along with that one. Sadi thinks that instead of spending so much money on propaganda against Islamic fundamentalism, the West ought rather to publicize Saadi's works throughout the West.

Geopolitics and arcs of crisis

It is not only in the case of Tajikistan that one gets the impression that the "threat of Islamic fundamentalism" has been conjured up—or in the case of the Bosnian Muslims, murdered up, by using monstrous acts to drive people into desperation and hatred. But why is all this happening? It is the curse of geopolitics—the strategic doctrine of the old British Empire, which has declared every broad "development alliance" on the Eurasian continent to be a *casus belli*. A century ago, when Eurasian cooperation between France, Germany, and Russia on industrialization and railroad building came within reach, the British establishment acted on the basis of this geopolitical doctrine to set the course toward World War I. They would sooner have war, than have a dynamic of economic development unfolding on the Eurasian continent.

The southern part of the "Eurasian land mass" is formed by the Islamic belt and China. It is obvious that both regions must be brought into a reasonable development plan to the benefit of the people living there, as the American economist Lyndon LaRouche has proposed in his Eurasian development plan (see *EIR*, July 17, 1992, "Eurasian Alliance for Infrastructure: Key to World Peace," and the map in *EIR*, Oct. 19, 1992, p. 36). But for the geopoliticians, this is no less a *casus belli* than was the planned construction 100 years ago of a railway from Berlin to Baghdad to establish a connection between western Europe and the Islamic world. The absurd

logic of geopolitics calls for building a wall between the North (western and eastern Europe, Russia) and the Islamic countries to the south—a wall of chaos and war. This is the content of the so-called “arc of crisis” policy stretching from North Africa to Central Asia.

In Eurasia alone, we see three wars which could prevent any economic development in the foreseeable future: in the Balkans, in the Caucasus, and in Tajikistan or Afghanistan. Although local and traditional conflicts play a role in this, we must be clear about one thing: Peace will only come to these regions after the imperial geopolitical mind-set, the fomenting of wars for the sole purpose of clinging to power, is understood, exposed, universally condemned, and replaced by a policy of “peace through development” based on the dictates of reason.

The same is true of the Gaza-Jericho agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization. If people in the Middle East succeed in creating a model of peace through joint economic development and scientific and technological progress, then this can also succeed in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and elsewhere. Only in this context could Kozyrev have had any reason to bring up the war in Tajikistan during the Mideast signing ceremonies.

Documentation

The following documents cite numerous examples of the reign of terror against Tajikistan citizens who have sought to oppose the communist regime which retook power in December 1992. The documents come from Helsinki Watch, a division of Human Rights Watch, and from Amnesty International. Although Amnesty International is infamous for its bias toward terrorists and its refusal so far to defend the human rights of U.S. political prisoner Lyndon LaRouche, the validity of the reports cited by Amnesty International in this instance has been independently confirmed with members of the Tajik opposition.

From a Jan. 21, 1993 letter from Human Rights Watch to Emomali Rakhmonov: “We have heard first-hand accounts of the Popular Front going on house-to-house ‘passport checks,’ presumably to round up individuals from Garm and Gorno-Badakhshan. To carry out such searches the Popular Front also reportedly has arbitrarily pulled people off buses, taken them from their homes, or harassed and physically abused people in the streets in order to track down specific individuals they are seeking.

“One eyewitness, for example, told Helsinki Watch that in mid-December three unidentified soldiers stopped a bus near Circus (in the eastern part of Dushanbe) and asked pas-

sengers to show their passports. Two youths who refused to show their passports were reportedly shot on the spot, and presumably killed.”

From a March 22, 1993 letter from Helsinki Watch to Emomali Rakhmonov: “Helsinki Watch . . . is appalled at recent reports of the torture and beatings of four men currently in detention in Dushanbe.

“The four detainees are Akhmadsho Komilov, about 35 years old, former deputy director of the Tajikistan Television Studio; Korshed Nazarov, about 35 years old, a television announcer; and Khariddin Kasimov, about 34 years old, television commentator; and Morbobob Mirrakhimov, age 35, former director of the Television and Radio Company of Tajikistan.”

From Amnesty International, May 1993: “Since December 1992 Amnesty International has obtained the names of almost 300 people who, according to unofficial sources, have been extrajudicially executed in and around Dushanbe by forces subordinate to the government of Tajikistan, or who have ‘disappeared’ after being detained by such forces. . . .

“Musoyev, a well-known film actor of Pamiri origin who had taken part in April and May 1992 in the demonstrations against President Rakhman Nabiyev, was reportedly detained at the ‘Karabalo’ bus-stop in Dushanbe on Dec. 18 or 19, 1992 by men in an armored personnel carrier. He was placed under arrest and taken away to an unknown destination. On the morning of the following day, Musoyev’s body, according to reports riddled with over 80 bullet wounds, was found on a street in Dushanbe’s 65th Mikroroyon (district). . . .

“On the evening of Jan. 27, 1993, people believed to be agents of the People’s Front burst into an apartment on Firdusi Street in Dushanbe, home of a family of Pamiri origin, the Rizvonovs. They shot dead all seven members of the family present in the apartment, mostly women and children, including a grandmother of 80 and a child of 4 years old. They also shot dead four other people, refugees from the civil war, who were staying with the Rizvonovs and whose names are not known. . . .

“Many bodies of alleged victims of extrajudicial execution which have been found in the Dushanbe city morgue are reported to show evidence of torture. A medical professional who gave Amnesty International an eyewitness account of conditions in the morgue in January and February 1993 reported that the most common form of torture in evidence was the tearing out of fingernails, but some victims had apparently had limbs deliberately broken, their ears cut off, or had been slashed with a blade horizontally across the face at eye level, apparently to blind them. The witness also told Amnesty International that some bodies showed evidence that barbaric methods of killing had been used: Some victims had had their throats cut, had been partially skinned alive, or had apparently been burned to death.”