

Tajikistan and Afghanistan: Have two hotbeds of war merged into one?

by M. Babur

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On the night of April 12, the former President of Tajikistan and long-serving First Secretary of its Communist Party, Rakhmon Nabyev, to whom the Supreme Soviet of Tajikistan had awarded the unprecedented title of colonel-general the year before, died in obscure circumstances.

Two weeks earlier, the political and military leaders of the Popular Front of Tajikistan, Sangak Safarov and Fayzali Saidov, had been killed in a fierce shoot-out near the town of Kurgan-Tyube. March 31 was declared a day of mourning throughout Tajikistan. The Moscow newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta's* headline over a well-informed account of the killings ran: "The Popular Front of Tajikistan Has Been Decapitated."

The clash between the two leaders was preceded in early March by the entry into the Tajik capital of Dushanbe of a large military force belonging to Fayzali Saidov. Having surrounded Tajikistan's Ministry of the Interior with his tanks, Saidov presented Minister Yakub Salimov with an ultimatum demanding "some leading post." He was made leader of the Bokhtar area in Khatlon Region, which had recently been created by merging the two southern border regions of Kurgan-Tyube and Kulyab. At the end of the month, the "Father of the Tajik Nation" and leader of the Popular Front's armed forces, Sangak Safarov, arrived at the same place in order to stake out spheres of influence and implement his demand that Fayzali Saidov's private army be disbanded. The negotiations turned into a massive argument that ended in the deaths of both leaders. The author of the above-mentioned article in the Moscow newspaper was right to subtitle it: "More Bloodshed Now Certain."

In the last two years alone, over 100,000 people have died as a result of the civil war in Tajikistan. Prominent politicians, public figures, and writers are murdered on the streets. At the end of 1992 the public prosecutor of Tajikistan, Nurullo Khuvayduloyev, was assassinated.

Between 1991 and 1993 there has also been a massive

population exodus from Tajikistan: The Russians are fleeing to Russia, and the Kirghiz living in the Leninabad region (now Khodzhent) and the Republic of Badakhshan (part of Tajikistan) are fleeing to Kyrgyzstan. According to the latest reports, there are already about 200,000 refugees from Tajikistan in Uzbekistan, including a large number of Tajiks trying to get to the Samarkand and Bukhara regions, where most of the population are also Tajiks. Only recently, the Tajiks were demanding the return of these economically and culturally important regions to their "historical motherland," i.e., Tajikistan. This was a source of great worry to the Uzbek authorities.

Now Tashkent is worried by the growing influx of Tajik refugees into Uzbekistan itself.

However, the most serious problem is undoubtedly the emigration of about 100,000 Tajiks into neighboring Afghanistan. Most of them have taken refuge in the border provinces of Balkh, Konduz, Samangan, and Takhar, which are close to the southern bank of the Amudar'ya (Oxus) and Pyandzh border rivers, and they are there under duress. Mainly they are Tajiks from Garm and the Pamirs—followers of the Islamic Democratic Opposition trying to escape being killed by the victorious army of the new government of Tajikistan, the forces of the People's Front that were until recently headed by Sangak Safarov, and by the numerous bands of marauders, some of whom got their weapons from Afghanistan.

Power in Dushanbe now belongs to members of the Kulyab-Leninabad clan, whose representatives ruled Tajikistan for decades. They were deposed by the opposition in May 1992, but returned to power in the autumn of the same year with the active matériel and military assistance of Uzbekistan. The clan is headed by the new president of the Supreme Soviet, E. Rakhmonov, who hastened to express his gratitude to I. Karimov, the President of Uzbekistan, by entitling him "Father of All the Tajiks."

The refugee camps

In the border provinces of northern Afghanistan just mentioned, which are historically known as Southern Turkestan, there are five large Tajik refugee camps. The situation in

these camps varies. In the Balkh and Samangan camps, which are controlled by the National Islam Movement and its leader General Dostum (an Uzbek), the refugees are not treated badly. There is relative order, as each day the inhabitants of Mazar-e Sharif deliver 25,000 loaves of unleavened bread to the refugees, and the U.N. Commission for Refugees has representatives in the town distributing food and financing the construction of medical facilities. The refugees regularly receive information about the situation in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Things are considerably worse in the camps at Konduz and Takhar. These are controlled by field commanders under Dostum's sworn enemy Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of the "implacables." Hardly any food from the U.N. reaches these camps, and the people living in them receive no information about their homeland.

Moreover, the men in the camps are put through a tough military drill to form detachments of fighters, some of whom are infiltrated into Tajikistan in order to join the Islamic counterattack, and others used to swell the ranks of Hekmatyar's army as he prepares for another spiral in his battle for power in Afghanistan.

New counteroffensive likely

As for the situation in Tajikistan itself, in March and April 1993 it again became very complicated. The republic's leadership—President of the Supreme Soviet E. Rakhmonov and Prime Minister Abdulmalik Abdullojanov—have issued repeated warnings that a massive counteroffensive is being prepared by the "Islamic Democratic" opposition, code-named "Retribution." It is assumed that this will be launched by the detachments of fighters who have survived in the Pamir Mountains and the borderlands, reinforced by "emigré" detachments hastily trained in the Afghan camps at Konduz and Takhar and loyal to Hekmatyar. Fighters are being trained particularly intensively in the Emam Saheb camp in Takhar Province on the southern bank of the Pyandzh. This camp and the whole area are fiercely controlled by Gen. Abdul Latifa, one of Hekmatyar's henchmen. In order to safeguard his military headquarters at Emam Saheb and the airfield next to it from possible artillery and especially air attacks by General Dostum's forces, Gen. Abdul Latifa has grouped some of the refugee camps around them as a human shield.

According to information received from the refugee camps and the U.N. Commission for Refugees office in Mazari-Sharif, small planes often land at Emam Saheb airfield bringing the latest weapons from Saudi Arabia and Iran for Abdul Latifa's soldiers and especially for the detachments of fighters being trained there to be sent into Tajikistan. It is rather revealing that when asked what would happen in Tajikistan if the leadership there did not reach an agreement with the opposition and the fighters the latter was preparing. Abdul Latif replied: "Then the war in Tajikistan will go on

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forever."

This statement is particularly ominous, given that the compromise agreement reached between the leaders of the nine Mojahed organizations in March 1993 to form a coalition government headed by Hekmatyar and with Burkhannudin Rabbani as President, has broken down. The agreement was confirmed in Mecca and Teheran, but Hekmatyar is categorically opposed to Akhmad Shakh Masud remaining as Minister of Defense, and is demanding the removal of General Dostum.

Insofar as Rabbani and Akhmad Shakh Masud are Tajiks, while Dostum and some of the other commanders in the north of the country are Uzbeks, one can say that the conflict is becoming increasingly ethnic in nature. The religious factor is also coming into play. Hekmatyar is leader of the Pushtuns and the fundamentalists. The latter explains why he is supporting the Islam opposition in Tajikistan and using violent methods in the republic, including deploying Tajik fighters trained in the Emam Saheb camp and others in Konduz and Takhar provinces.

After fighting flared up again in Kabul, the situation on the Afghan-Tajik border also deteriorated sharply. At the end of March and beginning of April, hundreds of fighters tried to cross the Amudar'ya and Pyandzh rivers by night and force their way into Tajikistan. The border posts on the Tajik side of these rivers, which are staffed by Russians, came under artillery bombardment, and several were killed. On April 7, Tajik fighters took ten Russian border guards and officers hostage. They were released only after the commanders of the 201st Russian Division stationed in Dushanbe and the general headquarters of the border troops of the Russian Federation had presented the fighters with an ultimatum. On April 9, after the territory protected by the "Moskovskii" unit of border guards had been shelled from the Afghan side, the

Russian Foreign Ministry sent a strongly worded note to the Afghan government in Kabul.

Diplomatic efforts to solve the crisis

On April 8, Andrei Kozyrev, the foreign minister of the Russian Federation, himself stopped off there en route from the Pakistani capital Islamabad. In March he had visited Teheran. Both in Iran and Pakistan he was trying to negotiate a peaceful settlement of the situation in the region, especially in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. He received the assurances he was after, but it is well-known that the ruling groups in Iran and Pakistan have their own long-term interests in Tajikistan. Early in 1992 sensational reports had appeared in the world press to the effect that the President of Tajikistan at the time, Rahmon Nabiyev, had secretly promised to supply Iran with large quantities of enriched uranium produced in the super-secret town of Chkhalovsk at a hyper-secret factory where enriched uranium was processed from other republics in Central Asia.

This and other, more important, questions were discussed in June 1992 during a visit by Nabiyev to Teheran and Islamabad. An agreement was signed not only for Tajikistan to receive credits from Iran, but also for a direct air link to be established between Teheran and Dushanbe, and for a railway to be built linking Mashhad in northeast Iran to Herat, Mazar-e Sharif, Konduz, and Badakhshan. The plan was to lay a main line from Konduz to Pyandzh in Tajikistan, which is linked by a line to Kurgan-Tyube, and to lay a mountain railway line from Feyzabad, the main town in the Afghan province of Badakhshan, to Khorog, the capital of the Badakhshan Republic in Tajikistan.

Badakhshan's strategic importance

Transport was also high on the agenda during Nabiyev's visit to Islamabad. An agreement was reached to build a highway as soon as possible from Gilgit and Chitral through the so-called Bakhan Strip (Afghanistan) to Khorog, again, in the Badakhshan Republic. The latter, which until recently was known as the Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Region of Tajikistan, is strategically extremely important. In the first instance, most of its population are Ismailists, i.e., religiously they are particularly close to Iran. Culturally and ethnically, however, the inhabitants of the Pamirs are extremely close to the inhabitants of Kashmir, and Kashmir, of course, is the main bone of contention between Pakistan and India. Secondly, the inhabitants of the Pamirs and of Garm form the basis of the "Islamic Democratic" opposition which was defeated last year in the struggle for power in Tajikistan. Most of the people in the camps in the Afghan provinces of Konduz and Takhar are Pamirians and Garmians, and it is in these camps that Hekmatyar's men train their fighters to go into Tajikistan and organize attacks on the border posts manned by Russians on the northern banks of the Amudar'ya and Pyandzh. Thirdly, the Badakhshan Republic borders in

the east and northeast with Xinjiang, where the Chinese authorities have recently been extremely worried by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism among the local population. Moreover, some of the Badakhshan-Xinjiang (i.e., Tajik-Chinese) border has not yet been demarcated.

Clearly, then, the defeat of Rakhmon Nabiyev and the "Islamic Democratic" bloc in Tajikistan in 1992 dealt a serious blow to the long-term plans of the fundamentalist leaders in Afghanistan and influential political circles in Iran and Pakistan. The new twist in the power struggle in Afghanistan and the "Operation Retribution" counterattack planned by the "Islamic Democratic" bloc in Tajikistan therefore not only threaten to merge the Tajik and Afghan hotbeds into one, but also to unleash a fundamentalist offensive throughout the Middle East and Central Asia. The neighboring countries understand this, especially Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan President warns of terrorism

When Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov appeared before journalists of the International Association of Foreign Correspondents accredited to the CIS on March 12, 1992, he said: "When the coup took place in Tajikistan in May of last year, when the civil war broke out, when people were burnt alive, women disemboweled, hands cut off, people decapitated, and over 30,000 people murdered in the most barbaric fashion, no one asked who was aiding and abetting it." Recently, he said, 100 Stinger rockets had blown up in a ravine near Dushanbe, and somewhere else 400 tons of explosive had been discovered, evidently stockpiled for subversive purposes. A number of Mujahedin who were citizens of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other countries were being charged in Tajikistan in connection with these offenses, said Karimov. He gave his analysis of the situation in Afghanistan in the spring of 1993, and concluded: "Certain people want Afghanistan to be a kind of smoldering fire from which they can pick embers and cast them into the independent states of Central Asia, thus putting pressure on them. It is no secret that certain dark forces harbor those kinds of dreams. . . . Groups of terrorists are being trained in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran to carry out subversive activity in our region."

On March 13, 1993, Karimov wrote to the Secretary General of the United Nations, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, informing him of the situation and stressing that preparations were being made for massive incursions across the Afghan-Tajik border and vicious acts of terrorism in Central Asia generally. He insisted that a special report on the situation be submitted for discussion at a session of the Security Council. As a result of the continuing deterioration in the situation in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, and the attack on Russian forces stationed on the Afghan-Tajik border, at the beginning of April many influential newspapers in Russia published the text of Karimov's letter to the U.N., and echoed his concern that a huge theater of war was being created in Central Asia.