

Tajikistan: New challenges to security

Tajikistan is facing both internal and external security challenges mostly related to the rise of religious extremism and terrorist groups, in particular the Taliban. Terrorist attacks in September 2015, followed by a military response and closure of the Islamic Renaissance Party raised concerns about instability. The Taliban seizure of Kunduz on Tajikistan's borders further alarmed the country. Russia, the country's main security provider, is likely to increase its military presence and influence.

Background: civil war and rise of authoritarianism

Tajikistan's [civil war](#), the deadliest conflict in the post-Soviet space which left almost 100 000 dead, erupted after independence from the USSR and lasted almost five years, dividing the country into two main camps: a 'Russia-backed secular regime', and the 'Islamists' under the umbrella of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO). After a long [peace process](#), the war was ended by a United Nations-brokered [power-sharing agreement](#) signed in June 1997, promising 30% of the seats in executive power structures to the UTO. However, the 1997 deal with the opposition was challenged by [President Emomali Rahmon](#), gradually eroding UTO's representation in the government. The Islamic Renaissance Party (IRPT) lost its remaining [parliamentary seats](#) in March 2015, and its closure in September was [regarded](#) as the unofficial end of the power-sharing agreement.

The rubber-stamp [parliament](#) is dominated by President Rahmon's [People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan \(PDPT\)](#). On account of the Tajik regime's systematic repression of the opposition, Freedom House has classified it as '[consolidated authoritarian](#)'. President Rahmon – who in December 2015 was [granted](#) the title of 'Leader of the Nation' and lifelong immunity for anything he has done while in office – [appointed](#), on 27 January 2016, his daughter as the presidential chief of staff, further consolidating his grip on power.

Internal threats: rising terrorism and extremism

September attacks: A failed coup attempt?

On 4 September 2015, a Ministry of Defence complex in the capital Dushanbe, and a police station in the nearby city of Vahdat were [attacked](#), leaving 9 police officers and 13 militants dead. According to an official [statement](#), a criminal group led by Deputy Defence Minister Major-General Abduhalim Nazarzoda, an IRPT member and former UTO fighter who had been integrated in the Armed Forces in accordance with the 1997 Agreement, 'developed a concrete plan in order to launch an armed attack and captured significant amounts of different types of weapons and ammunitions'. The government described the event as an 'attempted coup' by General Nazarzoda, who was [dismissed](#) from his position immediately thereafter. According to Nazarzoda, who [denied](#) his involvement, the Tajik government had decided to liquidate former UTO commanders opposed to the IRPT's closure. Operations to detain Nazarzoda and his accomplices, who left Dushanbe for Ramit Gorge after the attacks, continued until they were killed during a battle on 16 September. On conclusion of operations, 25 terrorists had been liquidated and 125 members of the terrorist group arrested, with government forces suffering 14 casualties.

Crackdown on Islamist opposition increases security risks

The main challenger to the President's increasing grip on power had been the IRPT, the only legally registered Islamic party in Central Asia. Tajikistan's single genuine opposition party, the IRPT captured enough votes to pass the 5% threshold in legislative elections, winning two seats in the [2000](#), [2005](#) and [2010](#) elections. IRPT's representation in the parliament ended with the [2015 elections](#), conducted according to the [OSCE](#) 'in a restricted political space' which 'failed to provide a level playing field for candidates'. The IRPT, alleging fraud, [did not recognise](#) the results. [Calls](#) for the closure of the party became more widespread after the last elections as [marginalisation](#) of the IRPT increased. The IRPT's leaders claimed that members had been forced to leave the party, and [accused](#) the government of sealing off its offices and creating artificial obstacles which



prevented the party from organising a congress to elect its party leadership. Since dozens of members resigned and several of its regional offices were closed, the Ministry of Justice [announced](#), on 28 August 2015, that the IRPT was no longer an all-Republic party, [requiring](#) the party to end all its activities within ten days.

The government's long-running [pressure](#) on the IRPT reached a peak following the terrorist attacks in September 2015. During the offensive against Nazarzoda and his followers, accused of perpetrating the terrorist attacks in retaliation for the IRPT's closure, it was [alleged](#) to have orchestrated the rebellion. Dozens of party members and officials were arrested on the grounds that they were members of Nazarzoda's militant group. [Denying](#) any involvement in the attacks, IRPT leader Muhiddin Kabiri [stated](#) that 'the general's mutiny was skilfully used by Tajik authorities to reach their long goal at last, which is to depict us as radicals and extremists.' Tajikistan's Supreme Court [approved](#), on 29 September 2015, the General Prosecutor's request to ban the IRPT and brand it an extremist and terrorist organisation. Criminal cases have been opened against the party members detained. In addition, the Interior Ministry [applied](#) to Interpol for extradition of Muhiddin Kabiri, who has been in self-imposed [exile](#) since the 2015 elections. The increasing pressure on the opposition is likely to [backfire](#), while it [rekindles](#) fears of civil war.

A European External Action Service [statement](#) on 1 October 2015 noted that 'outlawing of IRPT adds a further restriction on the freedom of political expression and pluralism in the country'.

External threats: Taliban and ISIL/Da'esh push for international involvement

Tajikistan is [worried](#) about growing terrorist activities by radical groups, in particular the Taliban and ISIL/Da'esh, [branded](#) a terrorist organisation by the Tajik Supreme Court in May 2015. On 25 January 2015 the Interior Ministry [announced](#) that up to 1 000 Tajik citizens had left the country for Iraq and Syria to join ISIL/Da'esh; 148 of them had been killed in combat while 61 had returned. The gravity of the threat posed by ISIL/Da'esh to the region is shown by the defection in May 2015 of [US](#) and Russia-trained Colonel [Gulmurod Halimov](#), former commander of the Interior Ministry's special forces, to ISIL/Da'esh. One of the main sources of concern in the region is the possible [return](#) of militants to Central Asia to fight against secular and repressive governments. In September 2015, President Rahmon [announced](#) to the United Nations General Assembly that 'the fight against international terrorism and extremism' was one of Tajikistan's top priorities.

Following NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban have stepped up activities, [seizing](#) the strategic city of Kunduz near Tajikistan's border on 28 September 2015 before Afghan forces [retook](#) it with the aid of US airstrikes. [According](#) to a Tajik National Security Committee officer, the Taliban has over 1 000 fighters on the Tajik border. In addition, ISIL/Da'esh conducted its first-ever [attack](#) on Afghan forces in September 2015 and is [trying](#) to establish a stronghold in Afghanistan. Moreover, the [Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan](#) (IMU), which [declared](#) itself part of ISIL/Da'esh in August 2015, has been pushed back from North Waziristan by Pakistani military operations and is now based in Afghanistan's [Badakhshan region](#), bordering Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region, where local warlords and government forces had violent [clashes](#) in July 2012.

Russia assumes more responsibility, the USA and EU follow suit

Concerned by the increasing activity of ISIL/Da'esh, the Taliban and IMU, Tajikistan has called for international assistance, from Russia, in particular. The ISIL/Da'esh threat and security cooperation against it were [discussed](#) at the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation's summit held in September 2015 in Tajikistan. At their October 2015 summit in Astana, the Commonwealth of Independent States [signed](#) 17 agreements, including a statement on combating international terrorism and an agreement on military cooperation until 2020. Alarmed by [increased activity](#) by terrorist groups on the borders of the region, Russia, which already has a large [military base](#) in the country and had troops along the Afghan-Tajik border [until 2005](#), plans to [send](#) more personnel to Tajikistan to help it re-establish control over its border with Afghanistan. [Reinforcing](#) its military base with helicopters has been under way since October 2015.

For its part, the USA is also maintaining a presence in the region, having [decided](#) to respond to the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan by keeping 5 500 troops there, beyond the initially planned withdrawal in 2017. During his November 2015 Central Asian [tour](#), US Secretary of State John Kerry [reassured](#) Tajikistan of US commitment to security cooperation with Tajikistan. The EU is also concerned about the security situation in the region. At the [EU-Central Asia High Level Security Dialogue](#) meeting in March 2015 hosted by Tajikistan, the EU and Central Asian partners [agreed](#) to reinforce cooperation on fighting terrorism, radicalisation and border security. The [Council Conclusions](#) of June 2015 reiterated the EU's resolve to further develop security dialogues with Central Asian states.