

# **The Effects on Tajikistan of Security Developments in Afghanistan since 2001**

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## Abstract

How have the decades of conflict and instability in Afghanistan affected its closest Central Asian neighbour? This paper discusses the threats to security in Tajikistan that have emanated from Afghanistan, with a focus on drug-trafficking and religious extremism. It also considers the “other side of the coin”: benefits that have arisen from international efforts in the region, including “border management” efforts.

## Keywords

Tajikistan; Afghanistan; drug traffic; border surveillances/border controls; technical foreign aid; extremism; regional international security

## Introduction

The multiple and lengthy internal wars in Afghanistan over the past few decades left a cliché of a country being constantly at war, but also of a country lagging behind in human, economic, social and political development. There is surely no need to remind readers of a famous proverb: “Successful war strategies conclude with successful peace strategies”. Evidently, both parts were and are continuously failing in Afghanistan, thus generating a feeling of permanent threat for the neighbouring countries in Central and South Asia, as well as for most of the world. In the last two decades, Afghanistan has been associated with a source of imminent threats to security in Central and South Asia and the rest of the world – with heroindominated narcotics production, religious extremism, violent radicalism, terrorism and transnational organized criminality being a few of the threats that Afghanistan became well-known for. Far more rarely could an average citizen abroad enjoy learning about economic opportunities and the commercial/trade potential of Afghanistan. This country therefore presents a complex mixture of security threats and challenges along with business opportunities, a blend that has significant implications for the countries sharing a common border with Afghanistan.

Of Afghanistan’s three Central Asian neighbours – Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan – the first has the closest ethnic, cultural and linguistic ties with the country. It is well-known that Afghanistan hosted the huge refugee population from Tajikistan caused by the civil war in early 1990s. The mediation role Afghanistan played during the Tajik civil war brought the two countries ever closer together, while the post-2001 anti-terrorism military campaign in Afghanistan opened up a number of prospective areas of co-operation between them – although this does not prevent the authorities in Tajikistan from referring to their southern neighbour as a source of narcotics and religious extremism. In the previous two decades Tajikistan had found itself under a mixture of influences emanating from Afghanistan that had dual effects: forcing the Tajik political elites to fence themselves off from Afghanistan on the one hand, while building bridges to it on the other.

This paper will discuss the major effects of the war on terror led by an international coalition of states in Afghanistan and argue that Tajikistan, though continuously voicing its concerns about the situation’s security implications in the neighbouring state, has in fact gained far more than could have been expected back in the early 2000s. Tajikistan is still one of the transit states for Afghan opiates, while at the same time it has established and significantly increased the flow of trade with its neighbour. Most importantly, the war on terror brought Tajikistan to the forefront of international attention, a situation that the country’s top leadership has made good use of. It may therefore be expected that Tajikistan will seek to preserve these gains in the longer term beyond the International Security Assistance Forces’ (ISAF) withdrawal from Afghanistan.

## Security Matters the Most

After the civil war broke out in Tajikistan in 1992, the country became increasingly involved in international

narcotics transportation routes from production fields and laboratories in Afghanistan. Towards the end of the 1990s, Tajikistan became an integral part of the so-called northern drug route,<sup>2</sup> where drugs flow through the country northwards to Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan, through Kazakhstan and continue to Russia, with a certain proportion continuing on to European countries. Up until 2005, narcotic flows from Afghanistan were confronted primarily by the Russian border guards stationed in the country since Soviet times as part of the Central Asian military defence force. As of 2005, counter-narcotics became the sole responsibility of Tajikistan's law-enforcement agencies, including paramilitary national border troops. Although the government's anti-narcotics rhetoric before and after 2005 had different objectives, drug transit in terms of actual numbers showed a stable growth trend. Tajikistan was and currently remains a transit country for a large proportion of the narcotics originating from Afghanistan. Official statistics for 2012 published by the Drug Control Agency under the President of Tajikistan show a total seizure of nearly six tons – an increase compared with previous years, but almost the same as the 2008 level.<sup>3</sup>

As stated above, the narcotics transit through Tajikistan did not change much over the past decade and remains relatively significant – in relation to the volumes trafficked through southern (via Pakistan) and western (through Iran) routes.<sup>4</sup> This in turn resulted in the narcotics threat being placed permanently on the government's agenda and list of priorities in its relations with Afghanistan. But how exactly had narcotics from Afghanistan influenced Tajikistan? It may seem that the effects are entirely adverse, but in reality they are ambiguous. I will start with the negative effects. Firstly, the transit of drugs through Tajikistan created a small number of very powerful narcotics cartels in the country, which, for more than ten years now, have established and strengthened links throughout local law-enforcement agencies and local authorities. These networks maintained constant ties with similar cartels in Afghanistan and Russia. Journalistic investigations and individual scholars have hinted in recent years that some high-level public officials are involved in protecting local drug cartels of this kind to some degree. The most recent speculations about links between high-level officials and narcotics transit relate to the head of Tajik Railways, Amonullo Khukum, whose son is allegedly involved in drug transit.

The operations of narcotics cartels in the country led to the emergence of a significant shadow economy running on drug money. The 2012 International Monetary Fund (IMF) Regional Economic Outlook for Caucasus and Central Asia, for example, estimated that in the previous five years, the financial resources being fed into the shadow economy in Tajikistan could vary between 20 per cent and more than 30 per cent of GDP.<sup>5</sup> This estimate naturally includes a whole range of shadow economy sources – tax evasion, undeclared profits and criminal cash flows – where drug-related money laundering presumably occupies a special place. Yet if we close our eyes to the normative argument for a moment, it should be noted that the narcotics-fed shadow economy actually generates income in the economy's service sector, as do non-drug-fed parts of the shadow economy.

As a “derivative”, the existence of Afghan drugs-fed narcotics cartels is fuelling organized crime and drug-related criminality in the country. For instance, the number of drug-related criminal offences registered in

2 Cf. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Opiate Flows through Northern Afghanistan and Central Asia: a Threat Assessment*, 2012.

3 Cf. Drug Control Agency under the President of Tajikistan, *Report on the Drug Situation in the Republic of Tajikistan for 2012*, Dushanbe 2012.

4 Cf. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *The Global Afghan Opium Trade: a Threat Assessment*, 2011.

5 Available at: [www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/reo/2011/mcd/eng/pdf/cca\\_ch3.pdf](http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/reo/2011/mcd/eng/pdf/cca_ch3.pdf).

Tajikistan in the past two years has remained at about 900 cases per year, with the number of individuals convicted for drug-related crimes remaining at around 1,000 during the same period.<sup>6</sup> Accounting for a seemingly insignificant proportion of the total registered criminal offences (drug-related crimes make up only about seven per cent), drug-related criminality at individual level remains largely unreported, with wide networks of people involved in transportation, delivery, transit, storage, camouflaging and selling narcotics inside the country, as well as those transiting them outside of Tajikistan. But again, it has to be noted that the lower-level delivery, storage, dealer and transit networks do provide irregular and undoubtedly criminal employment, thereby generating incomes and cash flow.

The narcotics transit “business” was also posing a threat to the current regime, as it fed uncontrolled anti-government feelings. The most prominent example of this is the case of a former National Guard commander, Gaffor Mirzoev, who was once a member of the presidential back-up team, but was later imprisoned on charges of attempting to overthrow the constitutional regime in the country. Mirzoev, who led the pro-government armed brigade during the civil war years, held various senior management positions in law enforcement after the civil war ended. He used to be the head of the country’s drug control agency, and had accumulated significant reserves of arms and funds which, by and large, was the result of Mirzoev’s heavy involvement in narcotics transit. Although he was and is not the only person once close to the country’s higher leadership to be engaged in illegal drug transit, he belongs to the camp of those who tried to challenge the current regime.

In the list of negative effects of narcotics originating from Afghanistan, specific attention must be paid to the demand for drugs in Tajikistan and the related dramatic increase in the number of drug addicts over the past two decades. Easy access to drugs trafficked from the southern neighbour fostered by a number of socio-economic background conditions (unemployment, low living standards, poor awareness levels, etc.) led to a surge in the number of drug users in the country and is keeping demand for drugs more or less stable. Thousands of young people are currently using hard or soft narcotics, which reach the local markets from across the southern border. In the last ten years the issue has necessitated special government programmes, policies and facilities to stop and reverse the demand for drugs. Although the public authorities have managed to bring the situation under control, unreported drug-abuse assessments suggest that the issue remains topical and is still directly correlated to narcotics smuggling from Afghanistan.

Furthermore, it is argued that the transit of Afghan opiates through Tajikistan has indirectly worsened relations with its vital transport partner and neighbour Uzbekistan, which some years ago mined significant areas of its border with Tajikistan in a declared self-defence operation. Although ambiguous in its purpose, the laying of anti-personnel mines along the border with Tajikistan was justified by the Uzbek authorities as a step to counter the existing flow of drugs through Tajikistan to Uzbekistan and potential penetration by extremist groups.<sup>7</sup> There are no clear data on whether such anti-drug mining has in fact stopped or led to a notable restriction in the drug flows through Uzbekistan. There are, however, numerous reports of mine-related deaths among the civilian population in border areas. The dispute between the two neighbours continues, although it is important to underline the fact that the narcotics flow constituted a major argument in justification of the Uzbek authorities’ application of such measures.

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6 Report on the Drug Situation in the Republic of Tajikistan for 2012. Drug Control Agency under the President of Tajikistan. Dushanbe 2012.

7 For further details, see Central Asian News Service, Tajikistan vs Uzbekistan: spisok vzaimnykh pretenzy [Tajikistan vs Uzbekistan: a list of mutual claims], at: <http://ca-news.org/news:938431>.

Last, but not least, another indirect and highly unwanted effect that Tajikistan faces due to Afghan opiates is its image abroad, and particularly in Russia, as a drug-transiting country unable to counter narcotics that feed relevant markets in Russia. Although Afghan drugs transit through Tajikistan has been known for the last two decades, the Russian authorities' attitude and position on the matter had been changing in an interesting way, particularly since 2005, when Russia "lost" control over the Tajik/Afghan border. Russia's position on this matter was always hard-line, as the major destination for the Afghan opiates on the northern route is Russia itself. At the same time, the image of Tajikistan as an important source of drugs and Tajik citizens as narcotics couriers has been promoted in the Russian media over the years, which has led to a generally adverse attitude towards Tajikistan among Russian policy-making circles and the wider public. It must be noted that the overall dynamics of bilateral relations between Tajikistan and Russia played their part in shaping the image described above, but the fact remains that narcotics transit through Tajikistan is taken as justification for managing the public perception of Tajikistan in this way in Russia and negatively influencing the country.

The security discourse regarding the implications of the war in Afghanistan for Tajikistan, though by and large centred on narcotics trafficking, is in fact not limited to the latter. Another pressing issue of concern for the Tajik authorities that has been continuously associated with Afghanistan is the threat of religious extremism. The phenomenon of religious extremism became relevant during the years of civil war in Tajikistan, when the opposition forces were frequently accused of maintaining close relationships with Islamic fundamentalists and extremists in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Later on, after reaching national reconciliation between the government and opposition in Tajikistan, the country started to focus more on the threat posed by radical Islamic groups that were later criminalized by national legislation. These groups include Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU, which allegedly re-emerged after 2001 as the Islamic Movement of Turkestan<sup>8</sup>), and Salafiya. After incorporating former opposition leaders in the government in 1997, the Tajik authorities claimed that the above groups were supported both morally and financially from Afghanistan. The availability of training facilities in Afghanistan, the ease of crossing the border between the two states and patronage and experience shared between Afghanistan-based extremist networks and radical groups in Tajikistan all contributed to the persistent threat of externally supported extremism in Tajikistan. The government of Tajikistan still believes that the threat of religious extremism and radicalism is de facto supported from within the territory of Afghanistan. Constant operations of the law-enforcement agencies against followers of Hizb ut-Tahrir and Salafiya groups only heighten the fears of the central authorities, while hanging as a permanent shadow over security in Tajikistan.

Drawing a line here – on the effects of persistent war and related instability in Afghanistan on Tajikistan's security – does not mean that Tajikistan is not experiencing other security-related issues. Narcotics and religious extremism, however, are viewed by scholars and policy-makers as the most significant threats to security that have been exerting consistent and significant influence on Tajikistan. In fact, these two areas have, to a certain extent, made Tajikistan known not only in the Central Asian region, but also internationally. Looking back on the years that have passed since September 2001, some experts suggest that Tajikistan's fast track into the spotlight of international attention has been caused directly by the situation in Afghanistan and threats emanating from there. It may indeed seem that the government in Dushanbe did suffer from the war-facilitated narcotics, extremism, terrorism, cross-border trans-national criminality, and other threats in the past decade and is still suffering from them severely. However, persistent threats associated with Afghanistan had in fact indirectly produced a few positive side effects for Tajikistan, which over the years became

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8 Cf. Mariam Abou Zahab/Oliver Roy, *Islamist Networks: The Afghan-Pakistan Connection*, London 2004, p. 8.

significant sources of technical support for that country. The key issues in connection with this are border security and management, and reducing the quantity of drugs.

### **Security Threats: The Other Side of the Coin**

In the past eight years, Tajikistan has received a significant level of technical assistance from the international community to secure its border with Afghanistan so that an effective barrier to transnational threats is in place. Tajikistan has also received significant support from donor states and international organizations to fight narcotics in the country by applying various tools in different areas. Assuming national ownership of border security in 2005 following the withdrawal of the Russian border guards from the Tajik/ Afghan border (a legacy of the Soviet Union), Tajikistan was able to stress the necessity of strengthening border security vis-à-vis Afghanistan among the international community. In fact, the precondition for the flow of technical assistance to Tajikistan was its national ownership of this basic security function that a state is expected to execute – guarding the geographical boundaries of the state and securing it against all sorts of threats.

In 2006, the government of Tajikistan, noting imminent threats from Afghanistan, appealed to the international community for technical and financial assistance to strengthen border security and fight cross-border threats. The appeal was immediately taken up by several major international organizations, e.g. the UN, the OSCE and the EU, as well as individual states – the United States, Germany, Norway, Finland and many others. In the process, a new term was introduced for the purpose of legitimating such assistance – “border security and management”, which was also in line with European trends in external border security. The “border management” concept is a cornerstone of the EU-promoted integrated border management system (IBM), which broadens an old-fashioned, narrow understanding of border security as an entirely military or paramilitary border-defence service in the hands of a single agency responsible for border defence. The presence of IBM and border management as its key pillar implies the involvement of all services and agencies which, one way or another, work on the border, and addresses the needs of each agency as an integral part of the inter-agency approach. Applying the border-management concept has therefore enabled the international community to cover a wide variety of border-related institutions and processes in its technical assistance initiatives.

It must be stressed that the progress Tajikistan made in implementing the principles and practices of border management remains disputed and perhaps should not be discussed further in this paper. It is particularly relevant to reflect on the scope and volume of border-security assistance received by Tajikistan. The major international actors working in this field in Tajikistan are the United States of America, the European Union, Germany, Russia, UN agencies (UNODC, IOM, UNHCR) and the OSCE.

The following table shows the approximate volume of technical assistance provided to Tajikistan in the period 2005-2012.



Table 1 Estimated volume of technical assistance for border security and management, 2005-2013<sup>9</sup>

Agency/Donor	Estimates
United States of America	approx. 23 million USD
European Union	approx. 13 million EUR
UN agencies (cumulative)	approx. 40 million USD
OSCE	approx. 7 million EUR

In the past few years, Tajikistan has received a solid inflow of equipment, capacity building, infrastructure support and other types of assistance for border security and management, focused primarily on the Tajik/Afghan border. The following areas in particular were addressed by providing technical assistance in border security and management:

- the policy and legislative framework;
- capacity building for human resources of the relevant border and border-related agencies;
- infrastructure and equipment;
- international and inter-agency co-operation.

The specific activities that are carried out under each of the above areas are many and varied, but are aimed at a few simple objectives, i.e. to provide knowledge, promote the requisite attitude and equip the Tajik authorities with practical tools suitable for countering the threats coming from Afghanistan. International assistance allowed Tajikistan to achieve a number of breakthroughs in improving its capacity to secure borders and support other adjacent areas, policing and economic security. Almost a third of the border detachments and outposts, primarily on the Tajik/Afghan border but also on the borders with Kyrgyzstan and China, have been rebuilt, renovated or refurbished. Significant quantities of individual communications equipment, tactical and patrolling ammunition, special vehicles and other kinds of tools were received by border guards and customs and drug control authorities in Tajikistan. Most importantly, in the last eight years hundreds of officers at various levels in the relevant agencies went through training courses, seminars and other learning activities which improved the national professional capacity of a number of beneficiary agencies – the Border Guards, Customs, the Drug Control Agency, the Ministry of the Interior, the State Security Committee and several other institutions. Tajik officials became known far beyond the Central Asian region; they have established and maintained links to colleagues from a variety of countries; they are approached by some major powers (the US, Germany) for advice; they are constantly involved in stakeholder consultations on border security and general security issues in the region; their contacts have increased in number and improved in both their breadth and their quality. All in all, this has greatly advanced the capacity of Tajikistan in matters of border security and management and the fight against narcotics trafficking and related crimes.

Hence, it is becoming obvious that the effects of the war in Afghanistan in no sense had only negative implications for Tajikistan; in fact, they triggered some positive benefits and changes for the country. It can be asserted that security-related instability and continuous war in Afghanistan, though remaining a constant

<sup>9</sup> The estimates were retrieved from internal documents and are not always available in public sources.


and serious concern for Dushanbe, led to remarkable progress in terms of strengthening border security and management in just a few years.

### **There Are Two Sides to Every Coin: Concluding Remarks**

The above short overview of security developments in Afghanistan over the past decade underlines one important message, to quote the words of a well-known proverb: There are two sides to every coin. Even severe threats to security can have a positive impact for a country directly affected by them. It very much applies to the case discussed in this paper. The sufferings endured by Tajikistan as a result of security threats coming through the border from Afghanistan were alleviated in recent years thanks to newly-emerged opportunities and the implementation of initiatives. The direct economic gains of establishing closer ties with Afghanistan are yet to be reviewed; however, there is a clear tendency of growing benefits for Tajikistan as opposed to threats related to Afghanistan.

At the moment though, concerns are increasing over the implications of the ISAF withdrawal from Afghan territory in 2014. Analysts are not unanimous in this regard, with some fearing the dramatic growth of narcotics flow and criminality over the border with Tajikistan, while others are confident that Afghanistan post-2014 will gradually turn into a self-sustained area of high instability without damaging established co-operation with Tajikistan. In fact, the persistence of security threats emanating from Afghanistan and/or their potential intensification as the backdrop to the ISAF withdrawal could spur an inflow of additional resources to Tajikistan by way of technical assistance for borders and other areas. The government in Dushanbe has already mastered the skill of attracting technical assistance inflows to improve the country's border security with Afghanistan and could therefore turn the upcoming ISAF withdrawal into a major benefit.





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