Mediating the Conflict in the Rasht Valley, Tajikistan

The Hegemonic Narrative and Anti-Hegemonic Challenges

Accepted version of an article published in *Central Asian Affairs*:
Lemon, Edward. " Mediating the Conflict in the Rasht Valley, Tajikistan", *Central Asian Affairs* 1, 2 (2014): 247-272.

Edward Lemon
Department of Politics, University of Exeter
ejl212@exeter.ac.uk

Abstract

Between 2009 and 2011 Tajikistan experienced one of the worst bouts of political violence since the end of the country's civil war. The fighting was concentrated in the Rasht Valley, an area traditionally associated with opposition to the regime. As a result, the government attempted to fix the meaning of the conflict around the signifiers "international terrorism" and "radical Islam." This framing directly reproduced the regime's hegemony through legitimating the removal of opponents and contrasting the Tajik "self" with the terrorist "other." The hegemonic narrative was incomplete and contained inconsistencies. As a result, anti-hegemonic actors attempted to under- mine its legitimacy. Although these critical articulations destabilized the narrative, due to their dispersed and divergent nature, it ultimately maintained its hegemonic position.

Keywords

Tajikistan – terrorism – Islam – conflict – framing

On April 15, 2011, Tajik television displayed graphic images of militants killed by government forces during a special operation. The video contained images of illegal weapons caches, mountain hideouts, bomb-making books, and Islamist motifs. The narrator labeled the militants as "international terrorists" (*bain- almilli terroriston*). He stated that these men wanted to overthrow the goverment and enforce an Islamic state based on *shari'a* law in Tajikistan. Long-time government opponent Mullo Abdullo led the group.

doi 10.1163/22142290-00102005

The death of Mullo Abdullo brought to an end one of the most serious episodes of political violence in Tajikistan since end of the civil war in 1997. Most of the instability was concentrated in the Rasht Valley, an area traditionally associated with opposition to the Dushanbe regime. Between June 2009 and April 2011, almost 100 government troops and opposition militants were killed in sporadic fighting.

In this article, I focus on the governmental representations of the political violence in Tajikistan during this period and the challenges that this hegemonic discourse encountered. Using television, radio, the Internet, and newspapers, the government of Tajikistan attempted to mediate the conflict in Rasht, controlling the ways in which it was framed. For international relations theorist Francois Debrix, the goal of the mediator "is not to allow us to perceive or experience any reality that has been previously massaged, manufactured, and operated by the medium himself."[1] Yet, the government of Tajikistan framed the conflict as being perpetrated by "terrorists" influenced by "radical Islam."

Specifically, I examine the processes by which different dangers were produced by actors and the political consequences resulting from choosing one mode of interpretation over another. This is not to say that the militants in the Rasht Valley did not "exist," that they were not influenced by radical Islam or that they did not pose a threat to stability. Rather, the conflict only existed in any intelligible sense within the discourses that produced it as a knowable phenomenon. In this case the issue of "whether there really is an Islamic threat […] is perhaps secondary to the leadership's perception of it."[2] As such, I utilize and develop upon a literature on the representation of political violence in Central Asia, including the Andijan events of 2005, discourses on terrorism, and the region's (mis)representation within western geopolitical discourses.[3]

The government of Tajikistan attempted to fix the meaning of the conflict around two key signifiers: "international terrorism" and "radical Islam."

---

1 Francois Debrix, *Tabloid Terror: War, Culture, and Geopolitics* (London: Routledge, 2008), 4.

2 Roger Kangas, "State Building and Civil Society in Central Asia," in *Political Culture and Civil Society in the Soviet Successor States*, ed. Vladimir Tismaneanu (Armonk, ny: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), 271.

3 Nick Megoran, "Framing Andijon, Narrating the Nation: Islam Karimov's Account of the Events of 13 May 2005," *Central Asian Survey*, 27, no. 1, (2008): 15–31; Nick Megoran, "The Critical Geopolitics of Danger in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan," *Environment and Planning*, 23 (2004): 555–580; S. Horsman, "Themes of Official Discourses on Terrorism in Central Asia," *Third World Quarterly*, 26, no. 1 (2005): 199–213; John Heathershaw and Nick Megoran, "Contesting Danger: A New Agenda for Policy and Scholarship in Central Asia," *International Affairs*, 87, no. 3, (2011): 589–612.

By doing so, the government precluded any alternative narratives about the conflict. These narratives explained the conflict in terms of local politics and business.4 As a prominent local journalist argues, "This conflict was not about radical Islam, it was about business and politics. It was about the government trying to take control (*brat upravlenie*) of Rasht and the resources that are there, in particular the coal mine in Kamarob."5 Although my inter- views and discourse analysis indicate that this explanation is more plausible, the government of Tajikistan chose to frame the conflict differently and accrued material and symbolic benefits, both locally and internationally, fromdoing so.

This article is based on a combination of critical discourse analysis and semi-structured interviews with those responsible for producing the (anti) hegemonic discourses on the conflict.6 I analyzed 162 videos, reports, and articles in Tajik, English, and Russian. By combining textual analysis with interviews, I am able to reinforce my arguments relating to the role of the government's narrative in reproducing its hegemony.

I offer three interlinked arguments. First, the government of Tajikistan chose to frame the conflict as related to "radical Islam" and "international terrorism." Second, I argue that by interpreting and representing the conflict as they did, the government of Tajikistan was attempting to secure its hegemony. This hegemony existed in two forms. On the one hand, the government used the conflict to forcefully coerce disparate opposition forces into submission, bolstering its material hegemony. By labeling opposition commanders, such as Ali Bedaki, Nemat Azizov, Mirzo Ziyoyev, and Mullo Abdullo, as "terrorists," the government legitimized their removal. In addition, by placing the blame on "radical Islam," the government legitimated a crackdown on wider Islamic practices that it deemed "foreign" and "radical."

In the face of these threats, the government of Tajikistan wanted to represent themselves as the security guarantors for the Tajik people and as the protectors of national identity. As a local media consultant explains: "The

4 John Heathershaw and Sophie Roche, "Islam and Political Violence in Tajikistan: An Ethnological Perspective on the Causes and Consequences of the 2010 Armed Conflict in the Kamarob Gorge," *Ethnopolitics Papers*, no. 8 (2011); Matthew Stein, "Assessing the Capabilities of Tajikistan's Military and Security Forces: The 2010–1 Rasht Valley Operations." *fmsjric Analyst*, (2012). I also benefitted from reading chapters from an unpublished book manuscript about the Rasht conflict by Sophie Roche.

5 Author's interview with a prominent local journalist Dushanbe, July 24, 2013.

6 I followed the four-stage method for analyszing texts outlined in Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (New York: Prentice Hall, 2010).

government attempted to present a picture of the campaign as being orderly and the Tajik army as a well-equipped fighting force. They want to appear strong (*silnii*). But this façade masks a lack of professionalism at every level."7

Indeed, the governmental discourse of danger relating to Rasht was co-constitutive of the writing of national identity.8 The hegemonic discourse on Rasht portrayed the opposition as linked with "international terrorism" and therefore lying outside of legitimate Tajik identity. This altereity or "otherness" took on three dimensions. *Spatially*, the terrorist menace was said to come from abroad: from dangerous, hotbeds of extremism like Chechnya, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. *Temporally*, the government juxtaposed the so-called terrorists' call for violence with the population's desire for peace, which they linked to the fear of a return to the violence seen during the civil war. These links were substantiated by the fact that the leaders of the armed uprising in Rasht were all former opposition commanders. *Morally*, the government contrasted the ideal Tajik citizen—masculine, honorable, and peaceful—with the terrorist "other"—feminine, dishonorable, and violent. These interlinked processes helped the government define the Tajik "self."

Third, I argue that the inconsistencies and incompleteness of the hegemonic discourse made it vulnerable to destabilization by different anti-hegemonic articulations. Rather than forming a unified counter-hegemony, however, the criticisms were dispersed and divergent: anti-hegemonic.9 A combination of the lack of popular appeal due to the inaccessibility of independent media for many Tajiks and the contradictions among various anti-hegemonic articulations meant that the hegemonic narrative remained the dominant interpretation of the conflict for most citizens of Tajikistan.

My argument unfolds as follows: I begin by outlining how terms such as "terrorism" and "radical Islam" are subjective labels, the deployment of which is inherently linked to relations of power. I proceed to introduce the conflict in the Rasht Valley, tracing its origins to Soviet-era population transfers. In the third section, I link the government's framing of the Rasht conflict to the reproduction of their hegemony. Finally, I examine how this attempt to fix the meaning of the conflict met with anti-hegemonic challenges from within Tajikistan.

---

7 Author's interview with media consultant, Dushanbe, July 26, 2013.

8 David Campbell, *Writing Security: us Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

9 This concept was first outlined in A.B. Fetherston, "Peacekeeping, Conflict Resolution, and Peacebuilding: A Reconsideration of Theoretical Frameworks," *International Peacekeeping*, 17, no. 20, (2000): 190–217.

"Terrorism" as an Instrument of Power

As linguistic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein argues in his seminal work *Philosophical Investigations*, language draws us into a trap of essentialism. We are lured into thinking that concepts are physical objects that can be definitively described. Nevertheless, concepts do not need to be clearly defined to be meaningful. Instead they are characterized by a series of overlapping similarities, which he terms "family resemblances."10

No transcendental signifier exists with which to anchor a definition of terrorism. Nevertheless "family resemblances" exist between various definitions of terrorism—such as the use of violence or the threat of violence to intimidate others, its planned or strategic nature, its political goals, its noncivilian targeting, and its nonstate perpetrators—but none of these is necessary or sufficient for a definitive definition.11 By taking such an anti-foundational approach, as long as certain family resemblances are present, "terror is what is defined as being terror."12 The relative power position of the labeler matters. In this article, I stress the importance of the government of Tajikistan's conceptualization of terrorism because this laid the foundations for how the operation in Rasht came to be understood.

The government of Tajikistan defines terrorism in its Law on Combating Terrorism (1999). The law offers an amorphous concept; terrorism is defined as "violence or the threat of violence against individuals."13 Such vagueness allows the definition to be extended to the consequences of any "socially dangerous act" (Taj: *jamiyat khatarnok;* Rus: *obshechstvenno-opasnikh posledstvii*). In using this definition, the government of Tajikistan has brought acts such as violent protest, assassination, insurgency, and attacks on foreign nationals within its definition of terrorism.

The process by which actors seek to fix the meaning of concepts within a discourse is directly related to their position of relative hegemony. Indeed,

---

10 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

11 Jorgen Staun, "A Linguistic Turn in Terrorism Studies," *diis Working Paper*, 2, (2009): 10.

12 Ibid.; Jorgen Staun, "When, How, and Why Elites Frame Terrorists: A Wittgensteinian Analysis of Terror and Radicalisation," *Critical Studies in Terrorism*, 3, no. 3 (2010): 403–420.

13 Jumhirii Tojikiston (Republic of Tajikistan), "Konuni Jumhurii Tojikiston dar Boroi Muqovimat ba (Rasmikunonii) Daromadkhoi bo Rokhi Jinoyat Badastobarda ba Mablaghguzorii Terrorizm," (Law on Combating Terrorism), 1999, available via http://www.nbt.tj/files/Laws/law_RT_tj.pdf. An English translation can be found at http://www.legislationline.org/documents/id/6924.

"discourse is meaning in the service of power."[14] Here, the discourse theory developed by post-Marxist thinkers Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe is particularly relevant.[15] According to Laclau and Mouffe, signs that are yet to have their meaning fixed—and are thus polysemic—are called elements. Actors attempt to fix meaning around nodal points or privileged signs, upon which the definition of other concepts is contingent. Actors can only temporarily fix meaning for a moment through a process called closure, whereby other possible meanings are suppressed.[16] Discourse thus becomes a "reduction of possibilities."[17] The surplus of meaning, the meanings that are excluded from the sign, become the field of discursivity.[18] For Laclau and Mouffe, social phenomena are never total—a perpetual struggle of meaning exists between opposing actors—a process they label antagonism. Therefore, discourses are relational for Laclau and Mouffe, but they are never complete and in a process of continual flux.

The discourses on "terrorism" can be used to illustrate Laclau and Mouffe's theory. Actors attempt to fix the meaning around nodal points such as "political violence," "nonstate," and "illegitimate." They create momentary definitions by closing out other definitions, such as those that include states as potential terrorists. Nevertheless, contestation still exists between actors who fundamentally disagree what "terrorism" is.[19] Therefore no final, incontestable definition of "terrorism" can ever exist.

The Rasht Conflict (2008–2011)

The Rasht Valley formed the nexus of the conflict in question. This region has been at the periphery of Tajik politics since the republic was created by the Soviet Union in 1929. Until 1955, when it was broken up into different districts, the Rasht Valley was one administrative unit, the Gharm *viloyat* (region). This served to give the region its own sense of identity, which was separate from

14 Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change.* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 4.

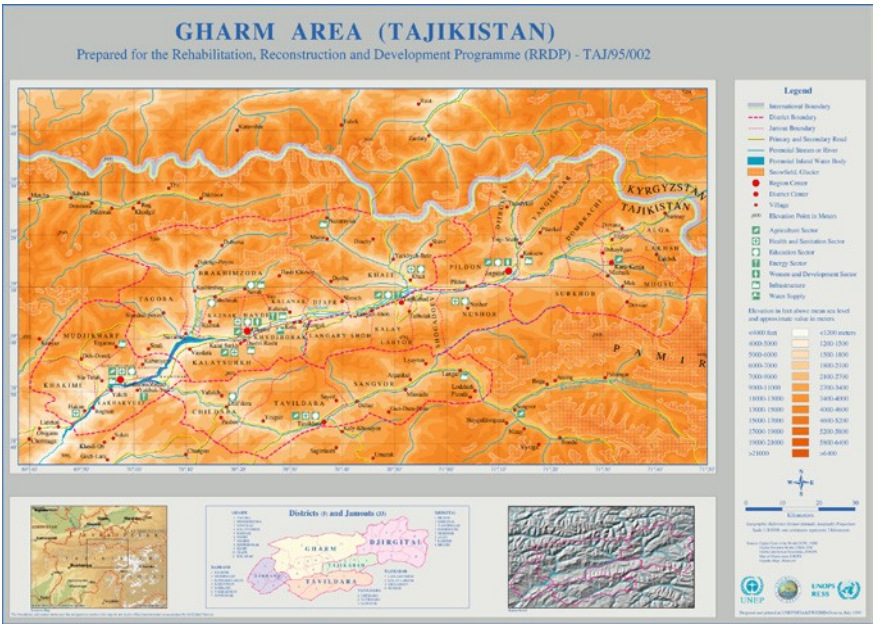
15 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and the Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

16 Ibid., p. 110.

17 Louise Phillips and Marianne Jorgensen, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: Sage, 2002), 27.

18 Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and the Socialist Strategy*, p. 111.

19 For an overview of the key debates, including state/non-state, effective counter-terrorism, and ethics, see Samuel Sinclair and Richard Jackson (eds), *Contemporary Debates on Terrorism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).



Map 1 *Gharm Area*

other parts of the republic. Unlike other parts of Tajikistan, the population of Gharm almost exclusively consists of ethnic Tajiks. Additionally, the Gharmis themselves consider their level of religiosity to be higher than that of many other Tajiks.20 More importantly, between 1920 and 1938, 48,000 households from mountainous regions in Tajikistan were forcibly resettled from the valley to Khatlon district in the south of the country.21 The Gharmis, who constituted two-thirds of the newly settled population, were housed in *kolzhozes* (collective farms) separate from the local population. This caused competition for resources between the long-term residents and the new arrivals, known as *mujohir* (immigrant). These tensions would eventually contribute to the out- break of the civil war of 1992 to 1997, in which the opposition coalition—the United Tajik Opposition (UTO)—was dominated by Gharmis.

20 Bruno De Cordier, "Islamic Faith-Based Development Organizations in Former Soviet Muslim Environments: The Mountain Societies Development Support Programme in the Rasht Valley, Tajikistan," *Central Asian Survey*, 27, no. 2, (2008): 169–84; Heathershaw and Roche, "Islam and Political Violence in Tajikistan."

21 Botakoz Kassymbekova, "Humans as Territory: Forced Resettlement and the Making of Soviet Tajikistan, 1920–38," *Central Asian Survey*, 30, no. 3 (2011): 349–370.

After the 1997 peace agreement, most of the opposition commanders attempted to reap the rewards of the deal, in which they were given 30% of government positions. As the regime in Dushanbe consolidated its power, most of the former commanders were squeezed out of power.22 Rasht until 2008, however, remained largely in the hands of local *jangsollar* (warlords), most notably Mirzokhuja Ahmadov. In 2008, the head of the paramilitary police (OMON), Colonel Oleg Zakharchenko, was killed in an attempt to apprehend Ahmadov. Despite later accepting a government amnesty and promising to retreat from politics, many members of the security services still harbored a desire for revenge. As one former sergeant at OMON told me, "Zakharchenko was our guy (*nash paren'*). When he was killed in 2009, a lot of people in the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior wanted to avenge his death by killing Ahmadov."23 Indeed, this personal desire for revenge among security officials was a key driver of the conflict in Rasht.

The latest conflict in Rasht was triggered by reports in 2009 of the return of Mullo Abdullo, another civil war-era leader who had escaped to Afghanistan in 2000. Abdullo, along with another former opposition commander, Nemat Azizov, and Mirzo Ziyoyev, a former minister of emergency situations, were accused by the government of drug trafficking from Afghanistan to Kyrgyzstan via Tavildara, a district connecting the Pamirs with the Rasht Valley. This gave the government an excuse to move militarily against the region in an "anti- narcotics" operation they codenamed *Mak-2009* (Poppy-2009). By the beginning of August 2009, the government was claiming success with Ziyoyev and Azizov both dead.

On August 20, 2010, 46 of those arrested in Tavildara in 2009 were put on trial on charges of terrorism, illegal possession of arms, and murder. Within three days, 25 prisoners, most of whom had just been sentenced, had escaped from a maximum-security prison in Dushanbe. Among the escapees were the brothers of Nemat Azizov, the sons of Mirzo Ziyoyev, and the brother of Ghaffar Mirzoev, the former head of the Presidential Guard, who was removed from his post in 2004. In addition there were four Dagestanis, one Russian from Tyumen region, two Uzbekistanis, and four Afghans.

As a sign of growing instability, on September 3 Tajikistan's first "suicide bomber" detonated an explosion next to the police headquarters in Khujand, killing two policemen and injuring 25 bystanders. Just two days later another

22 Kirill Nourzhanov, "Saviors of the Nation or Robber Barons? Warlord Politics in Tajikistan," *Central Asian Survey*, 24, no. 2 (2005): 109–130; J. Driscoll, "Exiting Anarchy: Militia Politics after the Post-Soviet Wars," (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2009).

23 Author's interview with former OMON sergeant, Dushanbe, July 19, 2013.

bomb exploded in a Dushanbe nightclub. The government blamed both of these bombings on "Islamist terrorists."24 An ambush in the Kamarob Gorge in the Rasht Valley on September 19, which left 35 servicemen dead, and the "accidental" crash of a Mi-8 helicopter carrying the State Committee for National Security's (GKNB) elite Alpha division on October 6 gave the impression that the government was losing control of the situation.25

In response, the government flooded the Rasht Valley with 2,000 troops. This eventually paid dividend. Ali Bedaki, another former commander accused of masterminding the Kamarob attack, was killed on January 4, 2011. "Public Enemy Number One," Mullo Abdullo, was killed in a security operation on April 15, 2011. In November 2011, the final escapee, Azamsho Ziyoyev, brother of the former minister of emergency situations, was recaptured.

Reproducing the Regime's Hegemony

Although the Rasht conflict existed objectively, it was scripted, spun, and given meaning through the governmental discourse. This process, however, was not benign. Instead it was interwoven with relations of power. Ultimately the governmental narrative was an attempt to reinforce the regime'shegemony.

Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci understood hegemony to be the construction of a "common sense" that brings together a myriad of different actors behind a common purpose.26 It is through a combination of political, economic, moral, and intellectual leadership that governments exercise power. According to Gramsci:

> The supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as "domination" and as "intellectual and moral leadership" and The "normal" exercise of hegemony on the now classical terrain of the parliamentary regime is characterized by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessivelyover consent.27

24 "Tajikistan: Militant Ambush Puts Spotlight on Security Situation," *EurasiaNet*, September20, 2010, http://www.eurasianet.org/node/61971 (accessed June 2013).

25 International Crisis Group (ICG), "Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats," *Asia Report*, No. 205, (2011): 5.

26 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988). 27 Ibid., p. 210.

Gramsci distinguishes between two types of hegemony. First, he describes a material and coercive form of hegemony that is maintained through force, domination, and control of the means of production. Second, he conceptualizes a symbolic hegemony, in which the ruling regime normalizes its power through the creation of a unified, coherent ideology that is disseminated through education and civil society. Through this discourse citizens are socialized into accepting state power as being in their interest. This second type of hegemony is more difficult to produce.28

Both of these types of hegemonic practices were utilized by the government of Tajikistan. First, by framing the conflict as related to "radical Islam" and "international terrorism," the regime was able to justify their crackdown on opposition within the country. Second, by representing the threat as "foreign," the regime attempted to constitute Tajik identity.

Since he was surreptitiously thrust into power by an alliance of Leninabadi and Kulobi elites in 1993, Emomali Rahmon, a former collective farm head from Danghara, near Kulob, has slowly consolidated power around his family network, a process that one academic labeled the "Kulobisation" of Tajikistan's state and society. Shirin Akiner, *Tajikistan: Disintegration or Reconciliation?* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2001). The government's pol- icy toward the Rasht conflict targeted two groups of opposition forces. First, it targeted the former-UTO commanders who had retained de facto control over the region. Second, the government also targeted religious elites and political parties. These included the *Hizbi Nahzati Islomi Tojikiston* (Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan or IRPT) and Hojji Akbar Turajonzoda, who had been the highest Muslim authority (*qazi-kalon*) in Tajikistan from 1988 to 1991 and deputy leader of the UTO during the civil war.

Through framing the enemy as "terrorists," "criminals," and "warlords," whose actions were therefore illegal and a threat to the state monopoly on violence, the government justified the removal of opposition leaders to the population. In addition, the re-assertion of state power at the periphery also allowed the government to wrestle control of lucrative business interests from the former commanders. As a local media consultant states:

> The Rasht Valley contains numerous mineral resources, especially coal.29In addition the valley is a drug-trafficking route for Afghan heroin. Before

28 Chantal Mouffe, *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (London: Kegan Paul and Routledge, 1979).

29 The Nazar-Aylok mine, located in the Kamarob Gorge, is the largest of these. It is rumoredto be under the control of Ahmadov. On September 2, 2013, the head of the mine was shot

2010, these business interests were under the control of the warlords (*boeviki*). The government could not tolerate this, so moved in to take control.

In order to help delegitimize their opponents, the government evoked the image of the irrational, evil terrorist, hell-bent on destruction. In a statement published on the governmental Khovar.tj website, Defense Minister Sherali Khairulloyev argued just this: "At a time like this, they're [the media] calling for dialogue and negotiations. One would like to ask, dialogue with whom? With terrorists and murderers (*qotilon*) or with you leaders of political parties?"30

The instrumentalist use of the label "terrorist" was perhaps best demonstrated in the case of Mirzokhuja Ahmadov. Initially blamed for the Kamarob ambush and accused of "terrorism," government forces attacked his house on September 22.31 However, on October 14 he accepted a government offer of amnesty and joined the government in hunting down other militants. Minister of Interior Abdurahim Qahhorov, explained, "Those who want to take part in preserving peace in the region deserve support. Therefore, now it is difficult to say whether Ahmadov is guilty or not."32 As such, Ahmadov's position was rather ambiguous. Never formally employed by the government, his status fluctuated between being included and excluded from the state. This blurring of the boundary between state/nonstate and regime/opposition indicates the socially constituted nature of these distinctions.

The government framed the conflict as being inspired by "radical Islam." On September 20, 2010, Ali Bedaki's brother, Khusniddin Davlatov, who had been arrested for membership in the banned *salafiya* movement, made a statement on national television.33 A terrified looking Davlatov announced that his

---

dead in Gharm. Two days later, Ahmadov accepted a position with the local Department of Internal Affairs.

30 Sherali Khairulloev, "Ki az ki Boyad Uzr Pursad?" *Khovar*, October 4, 2010, http://khovar.tj/archive/15698-k1250-az-k1250-boyad-uzr-pursad.html (accessed May 2013).

31 "Mirzokhudzha Ahmadov Gotovil Terakti v Dushanbe," *Asia Plus* September 23, 2010 http://news.tj/ru/newspaper/article/mirzokhudzha-ahmadov-gotovil-terakty-v-dushanbe (accessed May 2013).

32 "A. Qahharov: Parvandai Mirzokhuja Ahmadov Nigoi Nashudaast," Radio Ozodi, October 20, 2010, http://www.ozodi.org/content/article/2195604.html (accessed June 2013).

33 Meaning the "original ones" or the "pious ancestors," *salafiya* is a Sunni Islamic fundamentalist movement. Adherents attempt to emulate the practices of the earliest Muslims from the seventh century.

brother "has at least 100 militants (*tarafdor*) under his control. There are locals and mercenaries among them." He went on to describe the ways in which his brother had established a "terrorist camp" in the mountains of the Rasht district where he trained young men to engage in *jihad*.34 By framing the conflict as religiously inspired, the government legitimated a broader crackdown on expressions of Islamic belief in the country.

Since independence, the government of Tajikistan has attempted to create a dichotomy between good, official, local Islam, embodied in the *Shuroi Ulemo* (Council of Ulema), and bad, unofficial, foreign Islam.35 Through this practice, the government has simultaneously created this official/unofficial dichotomy while blurring the distinctions between different forms of "unofficial" Islamic practice, such as violent extremism and nonviolent fundamentalism.36 Such obscurantism serves to legitimate the regime's power by justifying a crackdown on a myriad of potential avenues of opposition, while simultaneously fixing what it means to be a Muslim in Tajikistan.

During the Rasht conflict the government intensified this policy. Just two days after the prison break, President Rahmon was in Farkhor. At a meeting with local residents he called on all Tajik citizens studying at *madrassas* abroad to return home. He stated:

> Do you think your children are going to become mullahs there? They are going to become terrorists. A different perception of the world, a different world outlook, and different traditions make these young men take inadequate actions and bring them, quite often, into the ranks of terrorists and extremists.37

By 2010, 1,400 Tajik students were studying Islam abroad, mainly in Pakistan, Iran, and al-Azhar University in Cairo. Until 2010 Tajiks constituted the largest

34 "Brat Tadzhikskovo Terrorista Ali Bedaki, Na Doprose," YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnURCnXtQRA (accessed May 2013).

35 Muriel Atkin, "The Politics of Polarization in Tajikistan," in *Central Asia: Its Strategic Importance and Future Prospects*, ed. H. Malik (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1994), 211–231; Tim Epkenhans, "Defining Normative Islam: Some Remarks on Contemporary Islamic Thought in Tajikistan—Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda's Sharia and Society," *Central Asian Survey*, 30, no. 1 (2011): 81–96.

36 Sally Cummings, *Understanding Central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2012), 115.

37 "Authorities Not Able to Control Process of Learning for Tajik Students at Foreign Religious Schools, Says Expert," *Asia Plus*, August 26, 2010, http://news.tj/en/news/authorities-not-able-control-process-learning-tajik-students-foreign-religious-schools- says-exp (accessed April 2014).

group from Central Asia studying at foreign *madrassas*.38 Within a matter of weeks, 1,200 of them had returned home, although only 60 of them were admit- ted to the country's only Islamic university in Dushanbe, which only enrolls 900 students.

In January 2011, ten mosques were closed in Dushanbe ostensibly for breaching the 2009 Law on Religion's articles on registration. Despite this bureaucratic explanation, Rahmon's speech to the Security Council on February 10 indicated that the rationale for this policy was in fact counter-radicalization. He linked the current conflict to this radicalization process, stating: "The Rasht events began from such mosques."39 Such a policy, which blurs the boundaries between increasing religiosity and more politicized forms of "radical Islam," has led to the alienation of many young Tajiks and will likely further fuel the problem it seeks to counteract.40

The Discourse of Islamic Danger and the Narration of Tajik Identity

National identity is not an innate part of the self that is inherently possessed by citizens. It is constituted, rather, in relation to difference via official and popular discourses or performances.41 The production of danger through foreign policy is co-constitutive of the writing of national identity.42 According to Campbell, "Danger is not an objective condition. It does not exist independently of those to whom it may become a threat."43 In his analysis of American foreign policy (alongside his work on interventions in Bosnia in the 1990s), he argues that identity is at least partially dependent on the production of evil others, who exist outside of the self. Indeed, governments often contrast the

38 David Abramson, "Foreign Religious Education and the Central Asian Islamic Revival: Impact and Prospects for Stability," Silk Road Paper (March 2010).

39 "Tseliu Religioznikh Ekstremistov Yavlyaetsya Izmenenie Nasilstvennim Putem Konsitutsionnogo Stroya Strani- Emomali Rakhmon," *Islam v sng*, February 11, 2011, http://www.islamsng.com/tjk/news/1164 (accessed August 2013).

40 Scott Poynting and David Whyte, *Counter-Terrorism and State Political Violence: The War on Terror as Terror* (London: Routledge, 2012).

41 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983).

42 Lena Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

43 Campbell, *Writing Security*.

stable inside, populated by like-minded "selves," with the chaotic outside, populated by dangerous "others."44

By representing the Rasht conflict as externally imposed nihilistic "terrorism"—a Manichean struggle of us versus them—the government of Tajikistan attempted to fix the meaning of the Tajik community and position itself as its defender.45 The dynamics of the government's narrative on the Rasht conflict are summarized nicely by the eulogy given to Mullo Abdullo on state television:

> In this way, the chapter of the life of this dangerous criminal (*khatarnok jinoyatkor)* and his criminal group, who wanted to disturb (*bekhorot*) the internationally known peace of the Tajik nation and the peaceful and stable situation in our dear country (*vatani aziz*) and who had been fighting against their own people and nation for many years and were in the spirit of sympathy for foreigners and with financial support of foreigners betraying their own homeland and nation ended with disgrace and dis- honor (*aib va benomus*).46

As well as the ideas of criminality that I have already discussed, there is also the idea that Mullo Abdullo was an "other." In this text the narrator tells us that Abdullo has betrayed the nation, that he was sponsored by foreigners, and that he threatened the peace deal that had ended the civil war. As such, this externality took on three dimensions—moral, spatial, and temporal.

The Temporal "Other": Return to Violence

Ole Wæver developed the idea of a temporal dimension of national identity in his work on the formation of distinct "west" and "east" European identities during the Cold War.47 He argued that "west" Europe defined its contemporary self as peaceful, in contrast with its historical self that was ravaged by two world wars.

Although the Tajik civil war ended in 1997, "Certain interpretations of the war are proffered by its victors to legitimate their own power and

---

44 R.B.J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); David Campbell, *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity, and Justice in Bosnia* (St. Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

45 Simon Dalby, "Imperialism, Domination, Culture: The Continued Relevance of Critical Geopolitics," *Geopolitics*, 13, no. 3 (2008): 413–436.

46 Tajik Television First Channel, 1300, April 16, 2011.

47 Ole Wæver, "European Security Identities*," Journal of Common Market Studies*, 34, no. 1 (1996): 103–132.

authority."48 The government-influenced historiography of the civil war depicts it as a conflict between radical Islam and the state.49 This can be contrasted with the scholarly literature that links the conflict with localism50 and the legacy of Soviet rule.51 Both of these explanations argue that the role of Islam was minimal.

As such, the peaceful, secular Tajik present is juxtaposed with a violent past associated with the encroachment of radical forms of Islam into the political arena. During the Rasht conflict, the government attributed the lack of popular support for the terrorists to the peaceful (*sulhdusti*) nature of its citizens (this rejection was therefore in line with their natural demeanors).52 In addition, this rejection was also linked to the economic and psychological trauma of the civil war in which over 20,000 people lost their lives.53 In a typical statement, Tohir Normatov, chief of staff at the Tajik Interior Ministry's headquarters, remarked, "The overwhelming majority of people who remember bitter lessons of the recent civil war well did not respond to their provocative calls."54

The Spatial "Other": Foreign Terrorists

The Rasht conflict was framed through the hegemonic discourse as exogenously produced and exported to Tajikistan. The casualty and arrest lists were deployed by the government to reinforce their argument that the conflict was linked to "international terrorism." These included a list of five Russian citizens

48 John Heathershaw, *Post-Conflict Tajikistan: The Politics of Peacebuilding and the Emergence of Legitimate Order* (London: Routledge, 2009), 19.

49 Muriel Atkin, "Islam as Faith, Politics, and Bogeyman in Tajikistan," in *The Politics of Religion in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, ed. Michael Bordeaux (Armonk, ny: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), 247–271; V.I. Bushkov and D.V. Mikulskii, *Istoria Grazhdanskoii Voini v Tadzhikistane* (Moscow: Poligraphservis, 1996); H. Blakkisrud and S. Nozimova, "History Writing and Nation Building in Post–Independence Tajikistan," *Nationalities Papers*, 28, no. 2 (2010): 173–189.

50 Heathershaw, *Post-Conflict Tajikistan*; Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000).

51 Barnett Rubin, "Russian Hegemony and State Breakdown at the Periphery: Causes and Consequences of the Tajik Civil War," in *Post-Soviet Political Order: Conflict and State Building*, ed. Jack Snyder (London: Routledge, 1998).

52 Tajik Television First Channel, 1300, October 23, 2010.

53 Vladimir Mukomel, "Demographic Consequences of Ethnic and Regional Conflicts in the cis," *Russian Social Science Review*, 42, no. 3 (2001): 23–24.

54 "Ubit Nemat Azizov: Mullo Abdullo Obyavil Dzhihad Vlastyam Tadzhikistana," *Asia Plus*, August 1, 2009 http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1249100280 (accessed January 2014).

killed in an armed confrontation near Havz-i Kabud on July 16, 2009, as well as "foreign terrorists" killed at Ahmadov's house in September 2010.

Three international "terrorist" groups were linked to events in Rasht: the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, *Al-Qaeda*, and a new organization called *Jamoat Ansrullah*. The government frequently blamed events on the imu; Azizov and Ziyoyev were known as "imu commanders" and responsibility for the Kamarob ambush claimed by the imu itself. The events in Rasht, in both 2009 and 2010, coincided with the arrest of imu members in different parts of the country. Despite claiming responsibility for the ambush, their links with the conflict remain unclear. In an audiotape, imu leader Tohir Yuldash denied that Ziyoyev had ever been a member of the movement, suggesting instead that he had "fallen victim to intrigues of the government."55 He madeno mention of Azizov.

The links with the imu were extended to its ally *Al-Qaeda*. The press nicknamed Mullo Abdullo "the Tajik Bin Laden";56 the government sought to promote this image. After his death, Tajik security services labeled him as *Al-Qaeda's* "leader" (Rus: *rukovoditel'*) in Tajikistan.57 A further link was provided in the form of one of the escapees, Ibrahim Nasriddinov, who the government mistakenly stated had been in Guantanamo Bay and was charged with membership in *Al-Qaeda* in 2007.

These links between international terrorist organizations were discursively brought together in the terrorist group *Jamaat Ansrullah*. The group's existence became public following the Khujand suicide bombing on September 3, 2010. Some authors voiced skepticism over its existence until a video appeared in September 2011, in which a Tajik-speaking man called on his countrymen to engage in *jihad* against *kufr* (nonbelievers).58 The government of Tajikistan created the impression that *Jamaat Ansrullah* was an externally sponsored group that wanted to destroy Tajikistan; this claim was further enhanced

55 "Lider Islamskovo Dvizheniya Uzbekistana Tahir Yuldashev Vistupil Ocherednoe Audio-Obrachsheenie" *Ferghana.ru*, July 16, 2009, http://rssclub.ru/3309/42.html. (accessed May 2013).

56 See for example: "Abdullo bin Rahim oyo Bin Lidan Tojikiston act?" *Millat*, September 22, 2010, 3.

57 Nurmuhammad Holzoda, "Spetssluzhbi rt: Mullo Abdullo bil rukovoditelem Al-Kaidi v Tadzhikistane," Radio Ozodi, April 20, 2011, http://www.ozodi.org/content/al-qaida_mullo_abdullo_tajikistan/9500121.html (accessed July 2013).

58 "Gruppirovka Dzhamaat Ansarullakh Prizivaet k Dzhikhadu," *Pressa.tj*, September 16, 2011, http://www.pressa.tj/news/gruppirovka-dzhamaat-ansarullah-prizyvaet-k-dzhihadu (accessed June 2013).

following the security services' discovery of the *Jamaat Ansrullah* flag in Mullo Abdullo's camp near Samsolik.59

The dynamics of what is included and what is excluded within the discourse are telling. Rather than stressing the "homegrown" nature of *Jamaat Ansrullah*, the government positioned them as "foreign" both in terms of their ideas and personnel. Evidence exists, however, to indicate that although "radical Islam" influenced the insurgents, they were also responding to political and economic grievances at the local level. Following the death of Abdullo, a group calling itself the "Mujahedeen of Tajikistan" released a statement.60 Rather than bearing the hallmarks of many other statements by "radical Islamist" groups, the statement focused on the politics of the country. It focused on the Rogun dam, the country's over-reliance on migration, rampant corruption, and repressive religious policies. This focus on local grievances bears a striking resemblance to *Adolat*, an Islamic movement that attempted to enforce *shari'a* law in Namangan, Uzbekistan, from 1990 onward.61 This grouping focused its efforts on Islamizing the population, addressing local issues, and overthrowing the *kufr* regime of Islam Karimov, rather than advocating a transnational *jihad*.

By portraying the conflict as externally imposed rather than internally driven, the government could shift any blame for causing the conflict away from itself. In addition, the creation of a boundary between a peaceful inside and a dangerous, terrorist-inhabited outside, helped to reaffirm Tajik identity.

The Moral "Other": Betraying the Nation

As in many discourses on terrorism, in Tajikistan the government framed the enemy as traitors who had betrayed their nation.62 As well as being financed by foreigners, the ideology that influenced these "terrorists" was deemed to be foreign also. Rahmon referenced a "different world outlook" that resulted in these men forgetting their own culture and becoming extremists. In an editorial, a progovernment academic analyzed the reasons that young people turn

59 InterNews Kazakhstan, "Mullo Abdullo Unichtozhen v Tadzhikistane," YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXUtBDKlN40 (accessed May 2014).

60 "Statement by the Mujahideen of Tajikistan on martyrdom of Emir Mullo Abdullo," April 26, 2011, http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2011/04/23/14159.shtml (accessed January 2014).

61 Its leader, Juma Namangani, would later found the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in 1994.

62 Megoran, "Framing Andijon, Narrating the Nation"; Richard Jackson, "Constructing Enemies: Islamic Terrorism in Political and Academic Discourse," *Government and Opposition*, 42, no. 3 (2007): 394–426.

to terrorism. He concluded that "semi-literate" mullahs were responsible for leading young people astray, causing them to lose their sense of patriotism (*vatandusti*). According to the author, "Instead of teaching the philosophy of love of the homeland (*vatandori*) and lessons of manliness (*javanondori adolat*), we taught this generation enmity, regionalism (*mahalgeroi*), hatred (*badbinuvu*) and hostility (*khusumat*)."63

These evocative words served to de-legitimize and discredit those involved in the violence. This terrorist betrayal is contrasted with images of the ideal Tajik man: a masculine, honorable, peaceful patriot. This narrative of the Tajik "self" is seen in official message to the people of Rasht in the aftermath of the Kamarob ambush.64 The author portrays the soldiers as heroes (*qahramon*) who were attacked by the enemies of Tajikistan (*dushmanoni millati Tojik*); terrorist cowards (*tarsonchak*). The Tajik people (*millat*), the author argues, will never falter in the face of terrorism and extremism.

As such, discourses on Tajik identity and security are gendered. In Tajikistan men should be dominant, breadwinners, whereas women should be passive, consigning themselves to domestic duties and childrearing.65 Men are responsible for securing this patriarchal system through compulsory military service. Patriotism (*vatandusti*) and masculinity (*odamgari*) are interlinked. Those who fail to defend national values are thus feminized.

Anti-hegemonic Challenges to the Governmental Narrative

To secure its hegemony, the government of Tajikistan attempted to shift the unmediated Rasht conflict (an element) into a moment by fixing its meaning around nodal points ("international terrorism" and "radical Islam"). This process of exclusion ruled out any different interpretations, including the idea that the conflict was concerned with local politics. Actors can never create a total, closed hegemonic discourse that is accepted as the incontrovertible "truth" by everyone. This impossibility creates the opportunity for anti- hegemonic challenges that contest these "truth" claims. These antagonisms exist both inside and outside the hegemonic discourse.

This resistance to the hegemonic discourse was not counter-hegemonic, but rather it was anti-hegemonic. Counter-hegemony aims to "build a consensus

63 Farrukh Suhrobshoh, "Jaro Javonon Terrorist Meshavand?" *sssr*, September 2, 2010, 7.

64 "Murojiatnoma Ba Mardumi Sharifi Rasht," *Jumhiriyat*, September 21, 2010: 1.

65 Collette Harris, *Control and Subversion: Gender in Tajikistan* (London: PlUTO Press, 2004).

among non-dominant groups which articulates an alternative direction for social life."66 Such unity did not exist in resistance to the hegemonic discourse on Rasht. Instead, a range of dispersed and divergent critiques helped to undermine the hegemonic discourse. These anti-hegemonic interventions came from a number of different positions, including political opposition par- ties, religious leaders, academics, and journalists. Each of these challenges focused on a different aspect of the discourse with the view to secure the interests of the challengers.

Despite these divergences, I have drawn out two points of weakness within the hegemonic discourse that these anti-hegemonic articulations have sought to exploit. First, many inconsistencies and self-contradictions exist within the hegemonic discourse. Second, the government enforced a *zakritaia zona* (closed zone) around the conflict, providing insufficient information to the public about the events in the east of the country.

Inconsistencies in the Hegemonic Discourse

In both 2009 and 2010, the government shifted its framing of the conflict. The official narrative explained the conflict in 2009 using the language of counter-narcotics. It denied claims that the operation was a counterinsurgency or crackdown on former warlords. On July 12 the government-controlled Khovar.tj website released information about the results of the operation—a total of 950 kilograms of drugs had been seized, 300 bushes of hemp had been destroyed, and 124 people, including seven Afghan citizens, had been arrested.67 These statistics amounted to material proof of the "truth" behind the governmental narrative. However, this area is not known for poppy cultivation or drug trafficking. A 2012 un report on drug trafficking in Central Asia found that the vast majority of opium crosses the border in Khatlon and in Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast; the route via Tavildara is relatively minor.68 This would indicate that the antidrug campaign, although it still took place, served as a cover story for a crackdown on former commanders.

In 2010, the shift in the narrative was less pronounced. The government initially described the operation as targeting the 25 escapees. When it

66 Fetherston, "Peacekeeping, Conflict Resolution, and Peacebuilding," p. 210.

67 "Skhodili Za Makom," *Lenta*, July 13, 2009. http://lenta.ru/articles/2009/07/13/dead/ (accessed June 2013).

68 unodc, "Opiate Flows through Northern Afghanistan and Central Asia: A Threat Assessment" (Geneva: United Nations Office for Drugs and Organized Crime, 2012): 61, http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/Afghanistan_northern_route_2012_web.pdf.

commenced the military operation in Rasht, however, it was clear that more substance to the operation existed than just recapturing escapees. And even though most of the conflict occurred in Rasht, 13 of the escapees were found near Dushanbe, in Khatlon, or in Afghanistan. Instead, the conflict was about the government taking political and economic control of the valley. As journalist a prominent local journalist states, "Like Khorog,69 it was an act of intimidation (*akt strasheniia*) that was part of the process by which the government consolidated power in each part of the country."70

In addition to the overall incoherence of the discourse, there were a number of inconsistencies in the government narrative on when, how, and by whom both Ziyoyev and Bedaki were killed.71 After Bedaki's death a video emerged that directly challenged the government account, that claimed he had been killed in an operation in Runob. It showed a half-naked Bedaki being interrogated by law-enforcement officials in the back of a car.72 The interrogator bears a striking resemblance to one man in the official television report of his death. Najabi Mirzo argues that this information leakage was a direct result of the government's inability to monopolize information:

> We have two types of information. The first is for the internal [governmental] audience. The second is for public consumption. Sometimes private information leaks (*otvisaiut*) out into the public sphere through the incompetence of civil servants. The government is weak and cannot totally control the information sphere.73

However, the fact that the situation, in which agencies acted autonomously without orders from the center, existed in the first place indicates the disaggregated nature of the Tajik state and the bureaucratic rivalries that characterize policymaking. In Tajikistan many power struggles exist, both within and between, governmental agencies. As a local media consultant states:

> The capture [and extrajudicial execution] of Ali Bedaki was not sanctioned from above. Instead a group of policemen detained Bedaki, but

69 On July 24, 2012, after the murder of a government official, security forces attacked militants in Khorog, Gorno Badakhshan, leaving more than 42 dead.

70 Author's interview with a prominent local journalist.

71 Alexander Sodiqov, "High-Profile Death Raises Questions in Tajikistan," *caci Analyst*, August 19, 2009.

72 "Ali Bedaki Alive," YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ayjEzf-2lr0 (accessed January 2014).

73 Interview with former editor-in-chief at Imruz, Dushanbe, July 29, 2013.

> then the KGB wanted to question him, as did the Ministry of Defense. They all wanted to be presented as the victors (*pobediteli*). In war there are many heroes and they wanted to be heroes themselves.74

Instead of being driven by rational calculation at the center, the government's policy on Rasht was driven by the desire of some officials to enhance their reputation. It appears as if each of these power centers was attempting to forge a role for itself within the state structure (*gosstruktura*), as well as accrue both symbolic and material resources for its members. When this attempt to maximize power met with challenges, the power centers defended their positions. For example, the Ministry of Defense viewed the media as a challenge to its reputation and therefore its power; it therefore went on the offensive against the free press, which I discuss later. This concern over how the center perceived their work was supplemented by a desire for revenge (*rasprava*):

> The government did all it could to represent the conflict as believable (*verno*) and necessary (*neobkhodimyi*). In reality the operation was driven by a desire to get revenge (*rasprava*) on those who had killed Tajik soldiers in Kamarob. In the end when Ali Bedaki was captured, instead of putting him on trial he was killed in an extra-juridical execution (*vne- sudebnaia eksekutsiia*).75

These inconsistencies led to the emergence of conspiracy theories surrounding his death.76 Such theories, which form an important mode of reality making in Central Asia, undermine the population's trust in the government. A common story was that "government forces […] killed him to prevent him from revealing information about weapons smuggling by government employees."77 Russia is said to have co-conspired with the Tajikistani authorities to bring Mullo Abdullo back from Pakistan as a means by which to tempt Ziyoyev into betraying the government. However the trope of the "foreign hand" (*dasti horiji*) or "third force" so frequently found in official and unofficial narratives of

74 Author's interview with media consultant, Dushanbe, July 26, 2013.

75 Author's interview with former editor-in-chief at Nigohi, Dushanbe, July 29, 2013.

76 John Heathershaw, "Of National Fathers and Russian Elder Brothers: Conspiracy Theories and Political Ideas in Post-Soviet Central Asia," *The Russian Review*, 71 (2012): 610–629.

77 "Tajikistan: Former UTO Commander Ziyoev Killed," us Embassy Dushanbe cable, July 14, 2009, as published by Wikileaks: http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id =09DUSHANBE845 (accessed July 2013).

the conflict, lacks sufficient evidence to constitute a plausible alternative explanation. As such, they can be seen as anti-hegemonic in that they question whether the hegemonic narrative is in fact the "truth," but they fail to replace it with a different discourse.

Mismanagement and the Government-Media Confrontation

> It was the same as last year in Khorog [2012]. There was pressure. Why? Because when the powers (*vlasti*) want to hide (*skrit'*) something, and when hiding is impossible, then they blame the media.78

The media confronted the government on two aspects of the conflict in Rasht. First, they called for more transparency, arguing that the government failed to provide enough information about the conflict. In 2010 the government of Tajikistan enforced a *zakritaia zona* around the conflict area. This included restricting access to journalists and international observers, as well as cutting off phone and Internet connections. Although the move was ostensibly to inhibit communication among the insurgents, it also served to strengthen the government's monopolization of information coming from Rasht. Second, they called for more accountability, actively criticizing the security services' mismanagement of the situation. Despite these challenges, few of the criticisms attacked the epistemological foundations of the hegemonic narrative or offered an alternative narrative to the conflict.

The ambush at Kamarob signified the government's lack of control over the security situation in the country. In the wake of this event, the media and opposition forces criticized the government's mismanagement of the situation. Two articles published in *Farazh*—entitled "Clay Dolls" and "Kamarob: Who is responsible for the death of 25 people?"—characterized this criticism.79 As the editor-in-chief of *Farazh* told me:

> Our objection was that they had sent young, inexperienced troops into battle against experienced terrorists (*opytnami terroristami*). I don't deny that they were terrorists who were trained in camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Among them were a number of Arabs, Chechens, and Russians. After the ambush Fariddun Mahmadaliyev [spokesman for the Ministry

78 Author's interview with a prominent local journalist.

79 Nurali Davlatov, "Kamarob: Khuni 25 Nafar ba Gardani Kist?" *Farazh*, September 22, 2010,4; "Lukhtakikhoi Gilin," *Farazh*, September 29, 2010: 1.

> of Defense] said that they had known since June that there were terrorists in that area. We had the following question: if the Ministry of Defense knew that there were terrorists there, why did they not send special forces (*spetzgrupy*) and instead sent the young men? Who answers for their blood?80

On September 25, 2010, Mahmadaliyev berated the media for its "provocative articles" about the Rasht conflict.81 He argued that it was not the place of the media to question the government during a time of conflict. In addition, he accused the media of "breaking the spirit of citizens and created a feeling of hopelessness in society." Instead, he said, "It is a high time that an awareness campaign and patriotism propaganda were carried out among the population in order to preserve achievements of the state independence." Soon after the press conference, the government-controlled printing houses refused to print *Farazh*, while Internet providers blocked access to four websites, citing "technical difficulties."82

Defense Minister Sherali Khairulloev took the accusations one stage further—in essence, he accused the media of collaborating with "terrorists." In a written statement, published on October 4 on the government-owned Khovar website, Khairulloev stated that he was incensed by the "note of glee" in the reporting on the Kamarob ambush:

> Most of the articles by Tajikistan's independent newspapers about a brutal attack by hired terrorists on a defense ministry convoy smell of support for this shameful action by ruthless murderers (*qotiloni bera- khmu*). Don't our esteemed journalists realize that offering support (*pushtiboni*) to terrorists equals abetting terrorism, and that supporting terrorists is a serious crime (*jinoyati sangin*)?83

This governmental conflation of criticizing the government with supporting terrorism constituted a crude attempt to undermine the media's legitimate concerns. It offers a further example of the government of Tajikistan's use of

---

80 Author's interview with editor-in-chief at Farazh, Dushanbe, July 29, 2013.

81 Tajik Television First Channel, 1600, September 29, 2010.

82 In addition to *Farazh*, printing houses also stopped printing two more newspapers, *Nigoh* and *Paykon*. Four websites—centrasia.ru, Fergana.ru, avesta.tj and tjknews.com—were all blocked.

83 Sherali Khairulloev, "Ki az ki Boyad Uzr Pursad?" *Khovar*, October 4, 2010, http://khovar.tj/archive/15698-k1250-az-k1250-boyad-uzr-pursad.html (accessed March 2014).

the pejorative label "terrorist" to discredit its opponents and secure its own position. Nevertheless, some journalists heeded the Ministry of Defense's words. In an editorial published in the privately owned *Millat* newspaper, one noted journalist criticized his profession as overly critical stating, "We do not dare to say anything hopeful and encouraging about our dear motherland's present and future or about the efforts being made by the country's leadership for the sake of our peoples' well-being."84 The majority of Tajik journalists, however, framed the statement as an unjustified attack on the freedom of speech.

> The potential of free mass media (*svobodnaia massovaia informatsiia*) in Tajikistan is greater than the government structures. Our politicians are never ready and they must attack anyone who criticizes them when their policies are not successful. Their position was unfounded (*neobosnovannaia*) and illogical (*nelogichnaia*). This kind of behavior destroys freedom of speech. Our journalists were doing their job. But during conflicts they face a closed zone (*zakritaia zona*) in which there is no access to the Internet, no phone coverage. As such we have to rely on the government for information.85

This list of criticisms, although extensive, only challenges the government for its lack of accountability and transparency rather than criticizing the way it framed the conflict itself. Although the target had been a military column and no civilian casualties existed, analysts did not question if the attack on Kamarob was indeed "terrorism."

Some local actors brought the accuracy of the governments account into question. Shokirjon Hakimov, the leader of the Social Democratic Party, attacked the government for not producing "weighty evidence to support [its] version of events in Rasht."86 Dodojon Atovulloev, an outspoken critic of the government, even went as far as to turn the narrative on its head and accuse the government itself of terrorism against its own people.87 However, with the exception of western academics John Heathershaw and Sophie Roche,

---

84 "Shohonu Vazironi Matbuoti Tojik yo Illati Darbandiro Boyad dar Khud Bijuiyem?" *Millat*, November 3, 2010, 3.

85 Author's interview with a former editor-in-chief at Imruz.

86 "Shokirdzhon Khakimov: Gnev Naroda v Otnoshenii Vlastei Tadzhikistana," *tjk News*, October 12, 2010, http://tjknews.com/?p=3654.

87 "Dododzhon Atovulloev: Na Vsekh Rakhmonov Tajikistana Ne Khvatit," *Odnako*, no. 36, October 4, 2010. Text reproduced: http://uzbekistanerk.com/rus/?p=2363.

and a few local commentators, all of whom placed the conflict within the con- text of local politics, no one formulated a convincing alternative explanation for the conflict.88

As a result of this failure to form an effective counter-hegemonic project, which would have defended the rights of the local population who saw their human rights curtailed, the hegemonic discourse maintained its position for the majority of the populace. Instead, a diverse and dispersed anti-hegemony, because of its very nature, was unsuccessful in gaining popular support.

Criticisms came from liberal-minded journalists (Atvulloev, Olimova), academics (Heathershaw, Roche, Sodiqov), religious leaders (Turajonzoda) and political opponents (Kabiri, Usmon, Atovulloev). With the exception of the academics, these individuals all had their own interests in challenging the hegemonic discourse. For example, as my interviews illustrated, the journalists viewed the government's enforcement of a *zakritaia zona* around the conflict as a threat to their position as commentators on current affairs. In contrast, Dodojon Atovulloev, an opposition politician in exile, sought to use the crisis to argue that the government did not have control of the country's security; therefore, the populace should support regime change.89 Due to the existence of such a broad spectrum of often contradictory, anti-hegemonic criticisms the challenge to the governmental discourse was weakened.

In terms of reach, the anti-hegemonic articulations had limitations as well. Much of the most critical material was published online (even sometimes on websites that the government had blocked). With only 20% of the population using the Internet, the reach of such articles was limited. For instance, one of the most popular articles, "Kak Pogib Mirzo Ziyoyev?" (How was Mirzo Ziyoyev Killed?), has only received 19,370 hits as of September 2014.90 In addition four websites that published articles criticizing the government were blocked in October 2010. Although many critical articles published in Tajik-language newspapers (such as *Farazh*) exist, their circulation is limited and was even halted in October 2010. As such it is unlikely that criticism of the government in the media was widely received. Most Tajiks, instead, relied on official Tajik media and Russian satellite channels, both of which followed the hegemonic discourse. Therefore the hegemonic discourse retained its position more by virtue of the weaknesses of the anti-hegemonic articulations, rather than by its own strengths.

88 Heathershaw and Roche, "Islam and Political Violence in Tajikistan."

89 "Dododzhon Atovulloev: Na Vsekh Rakhmonov Tajikistana Ne Khvatit."

90 Khaidar Shodiyev, "Kak Pogib Mirzo Ziyoev?" *Asia Plus*, July 14, 2011, http://news.tj/ru/newspaper/article/kak-pogib-mirzo-zieev (accessed July 2013).

Conclusion

In this article I offered three interlinked arguments regarding the conflict in the Rasht Valley between 2009 and 2011. First, I argued that the government of Tajikistan attempted to fix the meaning of the conflict around nodal points ("international terrorism" and "radical Islam"). In doing so, it suppressed alternative, and more plausible, explanations centered on local politics. Second, I argued that the framing of the conflict in the hegemonic discourse was directly linked to the regime's hegemony. This worked in two ways. First the narrative re-enforced the regime's material hegemony. By labeling the perpetrators as "terrorists" influenced by radical Islam, the government legitimized a crackdown on opposition movements and "foreign" manifestations of Islam. In doing so they created a dichotomy between the Tajik self—masculine, peaceful, honorable—and the terrorist "other"—feminine, violent, dishonorable. This writing of Tajik identity through a discourse of danger helped build a more symbolic, consent-based hegemony. Third, I argued that the hegemonic narrative met anti-hegemonic antagonisms due to its incompleteness and inconsistencies. Although these critical articulations destabilized the narrative, due to their dispersed and divergent nature, the narrative ultimately maintained its hegemonic position.

Evidence from the Rasht conflict indicates that a space of resistance to hegemonic discourse in Tajikistan exists. At present this resistance exists on online social networking platforms and among a minority of government critics. Rahmon retains his grip on power through repression and the tacit acceptance of the majority of Tajiks who fear the resumption of violence if he is challenged. Potential economic problems are somewhat reduced by remittances from Tajiks working abroad, which constitute an estimated 47 percent of the economy. The regime's hegemony, however, is not final.

As argued in this paper, the linking of the conflict to radical Islam was used to legitimize a crackdown on religion. A study of the impact of this crackdown is required. The experience of the assertive secularism of Soviet rule, in which unofficial Islamic practices and networks were intertwined with the official state-sanctioned *ulema*, would seem to indicate that the current aggressive policy towards religion is doomed to fail. Conversely, it will likely inspire more young Tajiks to challenge the status quo. The state's inability to maintain a monopoly over the "truth," as evidenced by the anti-hegemonic challenges it met in 2009 and 2010, indicates that the government's use of the labels "radical Islamist" and "terrorist" as semiological instruments of power, will have a limited effect.