Epilogue: The Civil War of 1992

In May 1992 the political competition and street protests in Dushanbe transitioned into an extended period of violent conflict, with the worst of the violence occurring over the next seven to nine months. The central government—now an uneasy power-sharing compromise—became largely irrelevant as killing, looting and destruction of property spread throughout southern Tajikistan, driving people to flee to any location safer than their homes, including to Afghanistan. At first much of the violence lacked broader coordination as no well-organised armed forces with acknowledged leadership existed at the outbreak of the civil war. The political leadership of the opposition and central government had very little, if any, control over the people apparently fighting in their name. As the conflict worsened, leaders of the militias emerged—very few of them familiar to those outside their home areas. Men of various backgrounds rose to prominence based on their ability to recruit, arm and lead men in the war. They would successfully use a variety of recruiting and mobilising techniques based on pre-existing structures, networks and loyalties. This epilogue will provide a brief overview and short analysis of the most important phase of the civil war: from the outbreak of violence to the military victory of the anti-opposition Popular Front forces in December 1992 and the arrival in the capital of Tajikistan’s new leader, Emomali Rahmon.

At the beginning of the conflict the issue of regional identities being politicised was readily apparent, with Kulobi Tajiks dominant in pro-government demonstrations and Gharmi Tajiks heavily over-represented in the religious wing of the opposition. Region of origin (for example, Kulobi and Gharmi) would quickly become a matter of life or death as militias and even neighbours began to kill based on a person’s origin. This would apply also to ethnicity in the case of Uzbeks and Pamiris, who came to be identified with the ‘pro-government’ and opposition sides, respectively. With the logic of mobilising for conflict based on these identities, the cleavages between Islamists, democrats and incumbent ‘communists’ became increasingly useless in terms of analytical value. The most concise description is the assessment of Brent Hierman that the best way to view the civil war in Tajikistan (with as few words as possible) is ‘as a war fought between regional elites; specifically, following the collapse of the center, networks of elites, organized according to region, mobilized their

1 The only study conducted to determine the number of deaths in the civil war in Tajikistan put the number at 23,500, with 20,000 of these deaths occurring in 1992. See: Mukomel’, ‘Demograficheskie Posledstviia etnicheskikh i religioznikh konfliktov v SNG’, Naselednie & Obschestvo, No. 27 (April 1997), Table 1; Mukomel’, ‘Vooruzhennie mezhnatsional’n0ie i regional’0ie konflikti: lyudskie poteri, ekonomicheskii ushcherb i sotsial’nye posledstviia’, in Identichnost’ i konflikt v postsovetskikh gosudarstvakh.

2 The authors use ‘anti-opposition’ as the militias fighting against the pro-opposition forces were rejecting the incumbent leadership of Rahmon Nabiev and were seeking to install a different set of leaders in Dushanbe.
supporters against one another in an effort to gain control of the existing state institutions’. In addition to the attempt to take control of state institutions, the militias would seize state assets, land and private property, a phenomenon that would help drive much of the conflict throughout 1992.

**A Narrative of the War**

While the most devastating phase of the civil war in Tajikistan was fought in the rural south, the capital managed to avoid the worst of the conflict (there were assassinations, kidnappings, theft, and so on, in the capital, but nothing on the scale of what was happening in the south). The Government of National Reconciliation was rejected by all of the relevant powerbrokers in Leninobod, Hisor, Kulob and in many areas of the broader Qurghonteppa region. President Nabiev became increasingly irrelevant and unable to perform his duties, rejected by both the opposition and the increasingly powerful Kulobi and Hisor-based forces. Finally, in early September he resigned and returned home to Leninobod, exiting politics permanently. The opposition members of the coalition government proved equally inept, and few citizens had any confidence in whatever remained of the government and opposition in Dushanbe. In autumn 1992 the IRP—along with the DPT, Rastokhez and La’li Badakhshon—formed Najoti Vatan (‘Salvation of the Homeland’, aka the National Salvation Front), an effort at creating a broader unified military-political organisation. The leadership of Najoti Vatan attempted to form arrangements with government institutions, but the organisation was eventually, if not immediately, a failure. The exception to this failure, according to Bushkov and Mikulskii, was the Islamic Revival Party. The IRP was the only opposition entity able to survive the transition to civil war with any serious base of support. Most of the IRP-affiliated field commanders in the south were mullahs. The IRP was able to reach out to its network of local mullahs, each of whom could recruit their followers

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4 His place was taken by the Pamiri chair of the Supreme Soviet, Akbarsho Iskandarov, who served as interim president until the selection of Emomali Rahmon as chairman of the Supreme Soviet (the new top leadership position in Tajikistan after November 1992).
5 Najoti Vatan, the Dushanbe City Executive Committee, the city branch of the National Security Committee and the Interior Ministry signed a security agreement on 23 September regarding Dushanbe. The agreement stipulated that ‘observation points’ were to be set up at ‘important points’ in Dushanbe and that all signatories were to participate. See: *Tajik Radio* (23 September 1992), in *SWB SU*, 1495 (25 September 1992), i.
7 Bushkov and Mikulskii, *Anatomiia grazhdanskoj voiny v Tadzhikistane*, pp. 69–70.
into militias; however, as regional loyalties had prevailed, aside from a few individuals, the mullahs of Kulob and Hisor supported the incumbent, or rather anti-opposition, side, which was to eventually take the name Popular Front.

Attempts were made by numerous interlocutors to arrange cease-fires in the summer and autumn of 1992. For example, the former opposition presidential candidate Davlat Khudonazarov and the executive chairman of the Bokhtar district, Abdulmajid Dostiev, a Kulobi, were amongst them. Throughout June and July 1992, they tried to prevent bloodshed in Qurghonteppa, risking their lives, but with very little success. The true power-holders on the ground were the militia commanders, who ignored the proclamations of peace and urgings of negotiations by irrelevant entities and continued their operations. The only relevant outside power was Russia, which was appealed to by actors on both sides of the conflict. The forces of the 201st Motorised Rifle Division transitioned from a unified CIS command to a Russian command in late summer, which in theory allowed for the Russian leadership to make a unilateral decision on intervention without consulting its CIS partners. There was, however, no political will in Moscow to intervene, and Russia’s military capabilities were stretched. The 201st forces in Tajikistan were depleted, with the enlisted ranks (mostly local Tajiks) deserting, leaving the predominantly Slav officers to watch over their bases, equipment and families, as well as to protect refugees (in Qurghonteppa), infrastructure (for example, the Norak hydro-electric facilities) and even some prominent figures such as Rahmon Nabiev.

In late May 1992, population cleansing commenced in Tajikistan: Gharmis were expelled from the Kulob region, and Kulobis were driven from Gharm and Qarotegin, as well as the Lenin (Rudaki) and Fayzobod raions to the south-east of Dushanbe. Displaced Gharmis poured into the capital (200 by June, more than 14 000 by August), bolstering the ranks of Najoti Vatan. By July 1992, Kulob and the Gharmi-dominated districts of republican subordination had been ‘homogenised’. The epicentre of the conflict now moved to Qurghonteppa, where neither of the sub-ethnic factions constituted a majority, and zones of influence were not clear. People in the southern Vakhsh Valley were left to fend for themselves. In late spring and early summer, pro-opposition forces had the

9 Roy, ‘Is the Conflict in Tajikistan a Model for Conflicts throughout Central Asia’, pp. 134–5, 139–40. Regarding the mullahs of Kulob and Hisor, Roy argues that they justified their stance by developing ‘an Islamic rationale for this, often based on the idea of a national and traditional Islam heavily imbued with Naqshbandi Sufism, as opposed to the “innovative” Islam imported by the “Wahhabis” (a generic and pejorative term used for Islamists, whether or not of Saudi allegiance).’
10 Eventually Abdulmajid Dostiev joined the Popular Front, after Najoti Vatan militiamen burned his house and the houses of 27 members of his family—‘in the wake of this incident he could not look his relatives in the eye’. See: Rajabi Munki and Amirshoi Khatloni, Nomus (Dushanbe: Paik, 1994), p. 64.
momentum and were on the offensive throughout the south. During this time tens of thousands of Kulobi Tajiks and Uzbeks fled Qurghonteppa Province in the face of the increasingly confident pro-opposition forces, predominantly Gharmi Tajiks.

Attacks were directed not just against prominent anti-opposition figures, but also against communities as a whole. For example, in Qurghonteppa City, opposition forces attacked the Urghut Uzbek mahalla, leaving an unknown number dead.\(^{12}\) During summer 1992 more than 100 000 Kulobis and Uzbeks had become refugees within their own country, or internally displaced persons. In the face of violence, expropriation of homes and intimidation, Kulobi Tajiks fled some kolkhozes wholesale, seeking refuge mainly in Kulob. Their homes were then looted and destroyed or taken over by their Gharmi Tajik neighbours. In June 1992, Gharmis of the Turkmeniston kolkhoz (home to the IRP third-in-command Nuri) expelled the Kulobis from their mahalla, leaving them no choice but to take up residence in the nearby Moskva kolkhoz, which was majority Kulobi. The two sides in the Turkmeniston and Moskva kolkhozes, now firmly ‘homogenised’ as Gharmi and Kulobi, fought each other from June until November, when the main Kulobi forces arrived and defeated the Gharmis of the Turkmeniston kolkhoz.\(^{13}\) In the Qurghonteppa region, kolkhozes and villages that were mixed in a minority–majority region-of-origin pattern were more likely to be involved in the conflict and at an earlier point. In contrast, settlements that were evenly split stayed out of the conflict longer, with as few as just one or two managing to stay neutral for the entire conflict. When Gharmi forces came to a settlement with an even split, the local Gharmis would dissuade them from aggressive action. Local Kulobis would also do the same when Kulobi forces approached.\(^{14}\) Another more cynical possibility here is that in an evenly split settlement both sides would perceive the cost of expelling the other side as high and the possible outcome as unsure, while in a settlement with a small minority the task of expulsion would not be costly in terms of effort and loss of life for the majority side.

In Kulob, the defeated Kulobis who had retreated from Dushanbe quickly killed or chased out the very few opposition supporters in the province, leaving Kulob completely controlled by the counter-opposition forces by early summer; however, opposition forces blockaded Kulob from all directions, leading Kulobis to renew their anti-opposition efforts with a renewed urgency as they grew increasingly desperate behind the blockade. Kulob would obviously not be able to hold out long with access to Dushanbe and Qurghonteppa blocked, and with its back to Afghanistan, the Pamirs and Gharm. In late summer and

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12 See the comments by the Urgut kolkhoz chairman: Golos Tadzhikistana, 13 September 1992.
13 For the full narrative, see: Roy, The New Central Asia, p. 95.
early autumn, the Kulobi militias, with help from local Uzbeks, destroyed the blockade of Kulob and counterattacked into Qurghonteppa’s Vakhsh Valley, making steady gains against IRP commanders and local self-defence forces. By late September the Kulobi militias and their Uzbek allies had turned the tide against the opposition forces in Qurghonteppa and continued their offensive throughout the Vakhsh Valley in October. The brutal offensive killed thousands (armed combatants and civilians) and drove countless more out of their homes, some even to Afghanistan.

By late October the counter-opposition forces had taken the name Popular Front, but were still under the command of various leaders who cooperated with each other, sometimes poorly. Nevertheless, forces commanded by Kulobi Tajiks Sangak Safarov, Langari Langariev and Rustam Abdurahimov steadily gained strength and soon set their sights on Dushanbe. The Hisor-based Popular Front commander Safarali Kenjaev and his Uzbekistan-supplied forces attempted the first takeover of Dushanbe, along with the police officer Langariev and the musician turned Oshkoro leader Abdurahimov. They met stiff resistance, however, from opposition Gharmi and Pamiri forces in the city and retreated, leaving Langariev seriously injured and Abdurahimov dead. This left the criminal underworld figure Safarov, who had not been invited to the battle, as the most prominent commander amongst the counter-opposition Popular Front forces. Safarov consolidated forces under his command, executed the uncooperative leaders of both the Kulob and the Qurghonteppa oblasts,15 and prepared to take Dushanbe, which by now was starting to suffer serious deprivation. By late November the population of Dushanbe and the 100 000 refugees who were living in the city were experiencing serious hardship after two months of blockade.

On 10 November, acting president Iskandarov, the government and the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet submitted a joint resignation. The next session of the Supreme Soviet was held in the northern city of Khujand, far from the violence and chaos of the south. The sixteenth session, aided by the presence of 24 main field commanders from all sides,16 worked out a new configuration of elite compromise in the country

- the Leninobodis agreed to sacrifice Rahmon Nabiev, whose resignation was confirmed by the parliament
- the institution of the presidency was abolished

• Emomali Rahmonov, a forty-year-old people’s deputy from Kulob, was elected as the chairman of the Supreme Soviet
• Abdumalik Abdullojonov retained the premiership
• in the newly appointed Council of Ministers only one person represented Gharm; others were from Kulob, Leninobod and Hisor
• the Kulob and Qurghonteppa oblasts were merged again into the unified Khatlon oblast.

Emomali Rahmon (then known as Rahmonov), the leader of Kulob Province, was elected on a vote of 186 to eleven. Rahmon, who had only recently ascended to the top leadership position in Kulob after Sangak Safarov had executed the incumbent, was widely seen as being Safarov’s client and as a weak leader put in place by far more powerful militia commanders in the background.

After the sixteenth session, Leninobod made tremendous infusions of money and weaponry into the Popular Front, which Sangak Safarov had come to head after Kenjaev’s fiasco in Dushanbe. More importantly, Uzbekistan, with the explicit approval of Moscow, sent heavy equipment, instructors and even regular army units to aid Kulobi and Hisori militias, which in the beginning of December began to coalesce into a formidable 8000-strong force with a unified chain of command. On 10 December, the Popular Front moved into Dushanbe with the backing of security forces from Uzbekistan. The Russian military did not interfere, while Pamiri militiamen had already retreated from the capital for Badakhshan, and within two days the Popular Front troops had easily secured the city. When the opposition had control of the capital, Pamiri and Gharmi-dominated forces had targeted Kulobis, Uzbeks and even Russians in Dushanbe for theft and murder. Now a series of targeted killings in the other direction began to emerge: Popular Front forces were targeting and even executing Pamiris and Gharmi/Qarotegini Tajiks. This was later revealed to be a tactic from the very beginning of the offensive in Dushanbe when the Popular Front had attacked the Gharmi/Qarotegini population and houses in the opposition-dominated neighbourhoods of Ispechak, Ovul and Kazikhon. By late December the sound

17 Rahmonov was born in Danghara and grew up in the mahalla of Sangak Safarov, who became his patron. In early November 1992, Rahmonov made a meteoric rise from the position of a sovkhoz director to the chairman of the executive committee of the Kulob oblast, to replace Jiyonkhon Rizoev, killed on 28 October by Safarov.
of occasional gunfire was still a nightly occurrence in the capital; however, by
February 1993 the worst of the conflict throughout most of the country had
subsided. Government forces, however, were still focused on opposition forces
in the periphery of the country: the mountainous areas of Gharm and Tavildara,
as well as along the Afghan border areas of Kulob and Qurghonteppa.

Islam, Ethnicity and the Regionalisation of Forces

The civil war of 1992 was mainly between Kulobis, southern Uzbeks (including
Uzbek-speakers such as the Arabs, Qarluqs and Loqays) and Hisoris, organised
later in the year as the Popular Front, on one side, and Gharmis/Qaroteginis and
Ismaili Pamiris on the other. Those from the northern province of Leninobod,
both Uzbek and Tajik, avoided participating in the military conflict. From
the start, the conflict in Tajikistan was mostly a confrontation amongst
sub-ethnic groups, which developed in a progression from regional mobilisation
to regional domination. The groups mentioned above, however, were not
monolithic in their actions, nor were the sides to the conflict so hardened into
their positions based on identity right from the beginning of the conflict. As
the conflict progressed, the parties went through a process of regionalisation
(for example, Kulobis versus Gharmis) and ethnicisation.

Sangak Safarov saw the divide in regional terms from the very beginning. In
April 1992 a meeting of all formal and informal leaders of Kulob oblast was held,
during which he said: ‘We and you shall become one … All leaders born in the
Kulob Valley must unite in these days of hardship and do whatever it takes to
help the people of Kulob.’ At the protests, he was also framing the situation
in regional terms when he spoke of Kulobis as being able to restore order to the
city. Kulob’s leaders may have enunciated their policies in terms of defending
the ‘constitutional order’ and the fight against ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ and
‘Wahhabism’, but beneath these slogans a clear image of the enemy crystallised—
that of a vicious stranger belonging to a rival sub-ethnic group. An IRP official
was absolutely correct when saying that ‘these days the label “Wahhabi” is
stuck indiscriminately … on representatives of an entire region. Today people

21 Roy, ‘Is the Conflict in Tajikistan a Model for Conflicts throughout Central Asia’, pp. 133–6; Olivier Roy,
‘Islamic Militancy: Religion and Conflict in Central Asia’, in Searching for Peace in Central and South Asia, eds
Monique Mekenkamp, Paul van Tongeren and Hans van de Veen (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2002), p. 101;
Nourzhanov, ‘Saviours of the Nation or Robber Barons’, pp. 112, 117; Schoeberlein-Engel, ‘Conflicts in Tajikistan
22 For example, see: Kilavuz, Understanding Violent Conflict, pp. 208–9.
23 Nasriddinov, Turkish, pp. 288–9.
24 Whitlock, Land Beyond the River, p. 160.
from Rasht, Gharm, Vakhyo, Tojikobod, Darband, and so on, are meant by this term.’

An obscure head of an Uzbek militia in western Qurghonteppa put the essence of the civil conflict, as perceived by dozens of field commanders, in a nutshell: ‘you are not even local Tajiks, you are strangers, from the mountains, we don’t have enough land already, so clear off to your Pamirs and Gharm.’

Many in the opposition saw the issue in terms of regional and ethnic affiliation as well, even within their loose coalition. Mirbobob Mirrahim, who had done so much to destroy the incumbent government, retained the post of chairman of the State Broadcasting Committee in the new GNR cabinet. On 24 September 1992, he made an entry into his personal diary that illuminates the internal divisions:

Several arrogant youths from *La’li Badakhshon, Nosiri Khisrav*, the DPT and the IRP have officially demanded my resignation. They know now that I am from Uroteppa … I am an alien to the people of Gharm and the Pamirs. All power to the Gharmis and Pamiris … They pray and fast, but they do this for the sake of money and cushy positions.

Earlier, during the days of the Shahidon Square meeting, the opposition newspaper *Haft ganj* published an inflammatory analysis of Nabiev’s regime from an ethnic perspective:

The government, generally, relies on non-Tajiks, especially Uzbeks … Naturally, the anti-national government could not have based itself on the authentic population. The second pillar of the government is Russian-speakers, but since the collapse of the Communist empire they have lost their influence … Only grandchildren of the bloodsucking Chengiz Khan [that is, Uzbeks] could have been capable of spilling the Tajiks’ blood twice in the past two years.

Opposition newspapers printed materials portraying Kulobis as dolts incapable of embracing progressive ideas; take the following attempt at ‘humorous’ dialogue, for example:

A. Congratulations! The people of Farkhor [southern Kulob] acquired consciousness, too. Their tents appeared [in the Shahidon Square].

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26 Dubnov, ‘Katastrofa v Tadzhikistane, o kotoroi v Rossii pochti nichiago ne znaiat’, p. 15.
B. I also thought so. But then found out that those were Gharmis living in Farkhor.

After the pro-government forces left Ozodi Square, the garbage-strewn area was shown on (opposition-controlled) TV with a sign that read ‘Museum of Kulob’ and accompanied with a commentator who remarked that Kulobis had dirtied the capital. TV reporters filmed a room in the basement of the Supreme Soviet filled with condoms and bottles while remarking that this was where Kulobis had taken kidnapped local girls to be raped. Similar rumours circulated in Kulob, where some speculated that Gharmis’ goals were to seize power and then take Kulob’s daughters. Later in May, some imams at Friday prayers took to taunting Kulobis as ‘losers’ while also mocking Uzbeks. Roy provides a similar analysis, noting that ‘from the first demonstrations, identity obtained over ideological denomination in both camps: in the sermons of the mullahs, “Kulabi” was equivalent to “Kafir” [infidel].

The opposition adviser Sergei Gretsky later acknowledged the opposition’s mistake of rhetorically attacking all Kulobis. He argues that in May 1992 ‘some leaders of the opposition indulged in the vice of localism by stirring anti-Kulobi emotions that deeply offended Kulob sensibilities and made them more prone to fight the opposition to the end’. Opposition leaders soon became much more explicit in singling out Kulobis. In early July the Najoti Vatan deputy chief of staff, Asliddin Sohibnazarov, stated: ‘it is high time we declare war on the people of Kulob, and on the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Kulob region, Qurbonali Mirzoaliev. All of us must take up arms.’ Some officials, such as the Qurghonteppa Province Executive Committee chairman, Nurali Qurbonov, at the end of September, were conciliatory when referring to Kulob as a whole. By this time, however, it was too late. As noted by Rubin, ‘the victorious militias chose men to kill not by indications of their ideology, but by indications of the region where they were born’. Kilavuz argues that

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30 Whitlock, Land Beyond the River, pp. 160, 164.
32 Gretsky, ‘Civil War in Tajikistan’, p. 222. He frames this as a response, albeit a poor one, to the pro-government side’s tactic of ‘exacerbating localism’; however, some individuals attempted to de-emphasise regional cleavages. As an example, in early July Moskovskie novosti reported that some in the government were intentionally not naming sides to the conflict in order to not draw in ‘local compatriots’ by emphasising regional aspects of the violent conflict in the Vakhsh Valley. See: Asal Azamova, ‘Tajikistan: In Flames of Internecine Wars’, Moskovskie novosti (5 July 1992), p. 9, in The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press, Vol. XLIV, No. 26 (29 July 1992).
33 Kenjaev, Tabadduloti Tojikiston, Vol. 1, p. 337.
34 Tajik Radio, 1300 gmt (28 September 1992), in SWB SU, 1499 (30 September 1992), B/6. Qurbonov commented on Tajik Radio: ‘We do not want to blame the people of Kulyab. The population of Kulyab, at large, support peace and want peace. However, those groups who are well known to us, their leaders being Sangak Safarov, Langari Langariev, and others, including Rustam Abdurakhim, were all involved in the bloodshed.’
[w]hen the militias began to kill people according to their regional origin, the process itself made regional identity and regionalism one of the most important factors in [the] war. Just being from Garm or the Pamirs became grounds for being killed by pro-government forces, while the opposition came to treat Kulyabis similarly. In order to create loyalty, the warring parties used regional identities and allegiances to create antagonism towards those from other regions, and thereby generate support for themselves. The process forced the majority to side with people from their own region.\(^{36}\)

There were, of course, some exceptions such as the Kulobi mullah Abdurahim, who stayed with the IRP even with the transition to violent conflict. Within the government in Dushanbe some leaders stayed above the regional conflict, despite their ethnicity or region of origin. The most prominent among these would be the acting president in late 1992, the Pamiri Akbarsho Iskandarov. Other leaders are difficult to classify, such as Safarali Kenjaev, who was of Yaghnobi origin but tied to power bases in the north and in Hisor, and who had a large number of ethnic Uzbeks under his command.

### The New Powers in Tajikistan

At the beginning of the civil war, leaders of armed groups quickly rose to prominence—many from positions of obscurity. How they recruited and armed their forces is a subject that is vital to understanding how pre-existing social structures played a role in determining the characteristics of the armed formations. The ‘regionalisation’ and ethnicisation of armed units and factions in Tajikistan were both a result of the structure of society in Tajikistan and a logical strategy—on the part of elites and non-elites involved in the conflict due to the mutual security dilemmas present.

At the outbreak of violent conflict there were not the solid cleavages between regional identities and ethnicities that existed half a year later. Ideological discourses of communism, Tajik nationalism, democracy and Islam proved to be insufficient in generating the required level of mobilisation, leaving regional loyalties as the soundest base for recruitment and for waging war; however, conflict entrepreneurs and political leaders in the opposition and in government still had to work towards this more fully polarised situation, ensuring benefits and power for themselves along the way. Starting with a significant level of political and economic relevance for regional and ethnic identities—with groups

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\(^{36}\) Kilavuz, *Understanding Violent Conflict*, pp. 188–90.

\(^{37}\) For use here, ‘regionalisation’ is defined as the increased significance of region of origin in political and military decision-making (including selection of allies and foes based on region of origin).
like Kulobis and Gharmis over-represented on the incumbent and opposition sides, respectively—the violent conflict created security dilemmas whereby the most logical course of action was to side with your regional grouping while viewing other groups as a threat to your livelihood and/or your life. This created the logic of regional bases for conducting the war, both at the elite and the non-elite levels.

Despite the eventual high levels of violence, combat operations in Qurghonteppa did not start with large-scale killings of civilians, nor were the regional government structures a target. Rather, field commanders were focused on controlling economic assets, especially once the conflict turned into a low-intensity affair, in a bid to secure political (and economic) power. Qurghonteppa’s economy, especially its agricultural sector, was a highly valued prize for the two sides to fight over.38 Whether or not the fight for control of resources was one of the main causes of the civil war, the war quickly turned into a battle for resources that shaped the conflict from an early point and promoted its continuation.39

The Kulobis were the clear victors in the political and military struggles of late 1992. Accordingly, many of the most important positions in the government went to Kulobis. On 7 January 1993, Sangak Safarov travelled to Qurghonteppa to the regional legislature, where he made the following blunt remarks: ‘The Kulobis are victors today. They have restored the state … Do not hope that we will allow you to restore the status quo.’40 Safarov’s men did well for themselves, especially his deputy, Yaqub Salimov, who became the interior minister. Journalists referred to Safarov as the ‘power behind the throne’41 and ‘the backbone of the government’.42 The view of Rahmon as a weak, unskilled leader who could only survive under the tutelage of Safarov was put to the test starting in April 1993 when Safarov was killed in a meeting-turned-gunfight with a disgruntled allied commander. Rahmon managed to survive without Safarov and has proved his skill at staying in power over the past two decades as he slowly marginalised or eliminated his former allies while also dealing with the opposition.

The diverse patterns of the conflict in 1992 have resulted in an inability to provide a single description that is true across time, location and individual or group. The most fitting examples of this are the emergence of armed factions and their attempts to recruit members and arm them. The leaders who emerged

were from a variety of backgrounds: civilian, military, police, government, criminal, religious, collective farm, and so on. And their methods of recruiting varied as well. Formal and informal networks and structures were employed to bring in recruits. The tactics employed in the recruitment process depended on the circumstances, as many fighters joined militias willingly while some were compelled by necessity or force. As for resources and arms to support their armed factions, militia leaders relied on a variety of sources, both foreign and domestic. The field commanders of the Tajik civil war, whether referred to as ‘warlords’, ‘strongmen’ or ‘commanders’, enjoyed a certain level of legitimacy. They tended to act in the interests of communities as well as for self-aggrandisement. Large segments of the population had to depend on various strongmen as far as their livelihood, security and often very existence were concerned.  

For years afterward the power of these field commanders would be felt throughout the republic.

The Decline of Violent Conflict and the Expansion of State Authority

From early 1993 the IRP regrouped in Afghanistan with the support of former mujahideen forces and waged a cross-border insurgency under their new top leader, Sayid Abdullo Nuri. The Pamiri forces had retreated to the GBAO and blocked access to the region, essentially removing themselves from the battlefield. Meanwhile, much of the leadership of the less militarily inclined parts of the opposition (that is, the DPT and Rastokhez) went into exile in Russia, Iran and beyond. The insurgent opposition forces were never able to threaten the relevant parts of the country, and their operations were mainly to peripheral areas along the border, in Darvoz and what has now come to be named the Rasht Valley. Russia was now backing the government forces and assisted them in their campaigns; however, President Rahmon also had to deal with his ostensibly allied field commanders and militia leaders of the Popular Front. The most serious of these challenges was posed by Mahmud Khudoyberdiev, who reigned supreme in the Qurghonteppa area and had a contentious relationship with the government in Dushanbe. Khudoyberdiev even mobilised his troops towards the capital in order to extract concessions from Rahmon. He was eventually defeated in a skirmish with government forces and exiled to Uzbekistan, from where he led a failed invasion of the northern Sughd Province in 1998.

The opposition forces in exile held talks with each other and by late 1994 had the rough outlines of a negotiating group under the new name of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO); however, combat operations were the domain

43 For full analysis, see: Nourzhanov, ‘Saviours of the Nation or Robber Barons’, p. 109.
of the IRP-dominated Movement for the Islamic Revival of Tajikistan and junior partners such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. By 1996–97 the Russians, the Iranians and the IRP’s sponsors in Afghanistan (for example, Ahmad Shah Massoud) realised that the ongoing civil war was detrimental to their efforts against the Taliban, which was rapidly gaining territory. All sides exerted pressure on the parties to the conflict, and in mid 1997 a peace agreement and power-sharing deal were signed between the opposition and the Tajik government. President Rahmon was then able to focus on marginalising and removing his less reliable or disruptive allies. The opposition itself was eventually targeted and the share of government portfolios it received as part of the peace deal was ‘truncated’ by Rahmon. The Government of Tajikistan has, since the official peace agreement, steadily expanded its authority throughout the country, despite facing occasional setbacks such as the violence in 2010 in the eastern Rasht Valley.

The Current Challenges of Sub-Ethnic Divisions and Islamism

A generation after independence, the trauma of the civil war continues to dominate the trajectory of nation-building in Tajikistan. The memory of bloodshed and violence in the collective psyche has inoculated the country somewhat against overt conflict, yet the problem of regional divisions, especially when exacerbated by the idiom of political Islam, has not withered away. The government of Emomali Rahmon has pursued a distinct ethno-centric approach to national consolidation since 1997, focusing on the historical exceptionalism of the Tajiks, their moderate Muslim sensibilities, and the ‘othering’ of Turkic neighbours. A lavish celebration of the 1100th anniversary of the Samanid Dynasty in 1999 introduced a major new myth to the state-sponsored discourse of nationalism. The era of the Samanids was proclaimed the Golden Age of Tajiks (as well as all Iranians), a high point in their political, cultural and economic achievements during the Middle Ages. A subtle move of the centre of Iranian civilisation to the east and the magnification of the specifically Tajik component therein were accompanied by a less subtle attack on the Turco-Mongol invaders who destroyed the Samanids and subjugated the Tajiks for centuries to come. ‘The Tajik people who survived this terrible onslaught will never forget the tragic events of their history’, wrote Rahmon, who then tried to reassure Uzbeks and other Turks who ‘have all settled on the welcoming Tajik land and shared the fate of the Tajik people’.44

The construction of Uzbekistan as an existential enemy forms an important part of the official nationalist discourse in Tajikistan. The neighbouring country is routinely accused of suppressing ethnic Tajiks on its territory, undermining the economic prosperity of Tajikistan, and interfering with its internal affairs. The regime of Islam Karimov is regularly criticised for its alleged pan-Turkism and its plans to rekindle the civil conflict in Tajikistan.\textsuperscript{45} Greater domestic consolidation, strong government and national unity are touted as the conditions for Tajikistan’s survival in this difficult environment. Constant appellation to history is essential to the dramaturgy of this process, and it is publicly manifested in the endless succession of festivities celebrating the heroes of Tajikistan, from Spitamenes of antiquity to the communist leader of Tajikistan during the Brezhnev period, Tursun Uljaboev, who transcended their patrimonial loyalties and self-interest in the service of all Tajiks. For example, 2009 saw large-scale commemoration of the 110th anniversary of Shirinsho Shotemur, a Pamiri and one of the founding fathers of the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic, who stood up to Uzbek chauvinism and Stalin’s arbitrariness to defend his nation and lost his life as a result.

The Government of Tajikistan, which is constitutionally a secular republic, has taken active steps to incorporate Islam into the fabric of nationhood, in contrast with other Central Asian republics. In 2008, President Rahmon announced Abu Hanifa (699–765 CE), the founder of one of the four major Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence, was an ethnic Tajik, and a year later initiated legislation declaring the Hanafi \textit{madhab} practised by the majority of Tajiks the official creed of the country. The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan has been allowed to function legally and freely (though suffering some recent setbacks), with the ultimate result that ‘Tajik Islamists abandoned Islamic state dreams and joined nation state making’.\textsuperscript{46} In a 2010 national opinion survey, 81 per cent of those polled agreed that the government respected their freedom of religion; corresponding figures for other rights and freedoms were much lower.\textsuperscript{47} Incorporating Islam into the official political discourse may thus be seen as a success for the government. Its progress in promoting ‘Tajikness’, however, has been more modest. The same survey indicated that ‘nationality plus region’ and ‘region’ continued to be the main markers of identity for people, at 50 and 25 per cent respectively, as opposed to 9 per cent of those who viewed themselves as citizens of the Republic of Tajikistan, and 4 per cent who selected ‘nationality’ as their primary association.\textsuperscript{48}

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There are Islamic groups in Tajikistan aside from the mainstream IRP that seek to bring changes to the Tajik state and society. These groups, all of them illegal, seek to create an Islamic state ruled by shari’a law. Included amongst these are the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb ut-Tahrir. Other organisations are less clear about their political goals and confine their activities to non-political missionary and education activities. Most notable here are Jamaati Tabligh and the Salafi movement. In regards to assessing their disruptive potential, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) researchers outlined the difficulties:

Unfortunately, years of intemperate and biased assessments have muddied the waters of Central Asian jihadism to a state of near-impenetrable murkiness … The skeptics ignore the demonstrated presence of jihadist groups and their clandestine support networks. The fearmongers exaggerate the threat that small groups of extremists pose and downplay the gains authoritarian states reap from dramatizing the militant menace.49

A 2012 survey by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) found that popular perceptions of the threat posed by radical Islamist groups varied significantly between Tajikistan’s regions, peaking in the Vakhsh Valley, and were widely associated with Gharmis.50 Meanwhile, perceptions of unfair domination by Kulobi Tajiks in the most powerful of the government structures are widespread in Tajikistan.51 The echoes of the civil war are all too clear in these patterns.

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In 1910, a Russian historian of Central Asia wrote:

A close acquaintance with Tajiks, and a study of their mores, traditions, and way of life, involuntarily compels one to take sympathy to this hard-working people who had sustained so much hardship and suffering that

50 Michael Taarnby, Islamist Radicalisation in Tajikistan: An Assessment of Current Trends (Dushanbe: Korshinos/OSCE, 2012), pp. 29, 59. While the small city of Isfara in the north is often associated with radical Islamist groups, popular perceptions in Tajikistan still mainly identify—fairly or not—Gharmis in the home region of the Rasht Valley (that is, Ghram/Qarotegin) and the Ghrami migrant community in the Vakhsh Valley as being supportive of radical Islamist views. Observation in Tajikistan by author, April 2012 to April 2013.
51 Observations and interviews in Tajikistan by author, April 2012 to April 2013.
one can only wonder how despite all of this it has not only failed to disappear from the face of the earth but also preserved in purity its tribal features.\textsuperscript{52}

The condescending, orientalist tone of this statement notwithstanding, it captures well the drama of the Tajiks’ long march through history. Their traditional social organisation and culture provided for resilience and survival in the pre-modern period. Conserved and reified during the colonial and Soviet periods, these very aspects militated against the emergence of a viable inclusive nationalism at the time of independence. More than 20 years later, these patterns persist. Tajikistan’s future may be uncertain, but what is certain is that no-one should disregard the lessons of Tajikistan’s past.