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Violence and instability in Tajikistan: the role of IS foreign fighters

The deadly prison riot that took place in Tajikistan is one of the latest episodes of violence that have characterized this Central Asian republic. The perceived threat of the jihadist terrorism, the combination between the aspirations of Tajik foreign fighters linked to the Islamic State and the potential destabilizing spill overs coming from the porous shared border with Afghanistan, clearly represents a difficult challenge for the President Emomali Rahmon in terms of national stability and regional security.

At the beginning, Tajikistan's authorities did not confirm over the unrest at a penal colony in the northern Sughd region, and then they admitted that 21 people were killed, while an independent source like Radio Ozodi claimed that around 50 people, including two guards, were killed in the unrest of November 8. (Tajikistan inches toward making capital from prison massacre, Eurasianet, November 19, 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-inches-toward-making-capital-from-prison-massacre>). The Islamic State claimed that its Tajik affiliates instigated the violence so highlighting the vulnerability of the country to prevent and to react against these threats.

It is evident that the IS threat represents a factor of potential destabilisation in the country and in the whole region: following the defeat of Daesh in Iraq and Syria many Central Asian fighters came back with the idea to create new cells of fighters in their homelands. According to the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research nearly 1.100 Tajiks have been fighters in Syria and Iraq, accounting for 1/3 of total Central Asian foreign fighters (Nodirbek Soliev, Central Asia, in *Counter Terrorist Trend and Analysis, A Journal of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research*, RSIS, vol.9, Issue 1, January 2017, p. 61).

In 2018 Tajikistan has been affected by several incidents that national authorities linked to the rising

activism of IS militants: in July, four foreign cyclists were killed by Tajiks militants who had pledged loyalty to Daesh. Moreover, in early November authorities arrested 12 people suspected of plotting a terrorist attack on the Russian military base in Dushanbe.

According to the State Committee for National Security (SCNS) of Tajikistan these individuals have been recruited by the Islamic State via Internet (After denial, Tajik security service confirms the report about plot to attack Russian military base, Asia Plus, November 12, 2018, <https://news.tj/en/news/tajikistan/security/20181114/after-denial-tajik-security-service-confirms-the-report-about-plot-to-attack-russian-military-base>).

If terrorists target a Russian military base in Tajikistan - the largest Russian military base outside the country and strategic backbone of the Moscow-regional security architecture based on the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) – the IS factor of destabilization would turn from a national to a regional dimension, pushing Russia to adopt harsh initiatives to fight this threat and also enhancing Moscow's military role to provide security to its weak partner.

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