

Xmas

TITLE: INTERNATIONAL AID AND CONFLICT IN TAJIKISTAN

AUTHOR: SHAHRBANOU TADJBAKHSI, Columbia University

**THE NATIONAL COUNCIL
FOR SOVIET AND EAST EUROPEAN
RESEARCH**

TITLE VIII PROGRAM

1755 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036

PROJECT INFORMATION:¹

CONTRACTOR:	Columbia University
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:	Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh & Alexander Motyl
COUNCIL CONTRACT NUMBER:	809-08
DATE:	May 17, 1996

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

Individual researchers retain the copyright on work products derived from research funded by Council Contract. The Council and the U.S. Government have the right to duplicate written reports and other materials submitted under Council Contract and to distribute such copies within the Council and U.S. Government for their own use, and to draw upon such reports and materials for their own studies; but the Council and U.S. Government do not have the right to distribute, or make such reports and materials available, outside the Council or U.S. Government without the written consent of the authors, except as may be required under the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 5 U.S.C. 552, or other applicable law.

¹ *The work leading to this report was supported in part by contract funds provided by the National Council for Soviet and East European Research, made available by the U. S. Department of State under Title VIII (the Soviet-Eastern European Research and Training Act of 1983, as amended). The analysis and interpretations contained in the report are those of the author(s).*

INTERNATIONAL AID AND CONFLICT IN TAJIKISTAN

Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh

What is the role of the international community in trying to prevent conflicts, lead to their cessation, or assist in the post-war reconstruction of a torn society? undoubtedly, the consequences of the involvement of the international community in a conflict have both negative and positive impacts which have to be weighed properly. This study examines one hypothesis, based loosely on observations of Tajikistan, namely; that in fragmented societies, when wars are caused precisely because of conflict between groups, unless the discord is resolved, assistance rendered by the international community may not only perpetuate problems, but also lead to their intensification.

The purpose of this discussion is not to carry out a systematic critique of the work of the international community in Tajikistan, i.e, that of international NGOs, UN agencies, and other organizations. It is rather an exercise in thinking about negative consequences that can arise from a lack of awareness, or lack of planning. It is also an attempt to begin thinking theoretically about the concept of international assistance and conflict. Theoretical and empirical literature on this subject is available in journals of international ethics and international law, to which I do not have access from my present position in Tajikistan. In the absence of any literature, I shall try here to rely on observations of Tajikistan, hoping that in the future, I may be able to carry out a more thorough analysis of this question using other case studies. I beg therefore, for understanding of this study for what it is, an embryonic polemic which argues that under some circumstances, aid that is supposed to be benevolent can unwillingly cause more harm than good.

The case of Tajikistan is both analogous with and dissimilar to that of the other Newly Independent States (NIS) of Central Asia. Tajikistan is, as the other states are, in a state of transition from the Soviet society to a Post-Soviet one. It also shares the legacy of the Soviet system, one that provided incentives to state industries, encouraged large scale mono-cultures, hiked up statistics with inputs into the educational and health systems, and organized the society with Kolkhozes, Sovkhozes, Executive Committees (Ispolkoms) and Councils (Soviets), a full administrative system. Modern Tajikistan is also a territory which includes a symbiosis of multiple ethnic groups, a legacy of the arbitrary border delimitations dictated by Stalin's nationality policy in the late 1920s. The single most important feature that distinguishes Tajikistan from the other Central Asian republics and sets it up today as the poorest of the CIS countries, is the 1992-1993 civil war and its consequences: refugees, internally displaced persons, dysfunctional industries, and the fragmentation of society along various ethnic, religious, regional and ideological lines. Sectorial differences, which also exist in the other

Central Asian states, have led to an outright civil war only in the case of Tajikistan so far. For reasons discussed already in the paper "National Reconciliation: The Imperfect Whim" which the author submitted to the National Council for Soviet and East European Research¹, the goals of various interest groups have so far proved irreconcilable. Another characteristic of Tajikistan today is lack of the necessary infrastructure for the Central government to be able to provide and deliver resources to different regions, leading to strained inter-regional economic relations. Political and economic "regionalism", the tendency of representatives of the same region to seek benefits for each other only, has been one of the main factors of the civil war in Tajikistan, one that has led to the fragmentation of the nation. All this leads to the current problem that for many, national reconciliation does not exist in Tajikistan, that the government is not a national one, that it seeks to benefit particular groups. There exist a number of equally strong, powerful, well connected groups, each with their own specific goals that vie for economic and political power in the country.

Since the winter of 1993, a number of international organizations have been working in Tajikistan, ranging from UN agencies such as UNICEF, WFP, WHO, UNMOT (Mission of Monitors), UNHCR, and UNDP to the dozens of international NGOs that are involved in a number of humanitarian and development activities from distributing flour and clothing, to loans and credits to small enterprises, to beginning income generating activities. A number of organizations are also involved in promoting civil society and the rule of law, including training NGOs and monitoring human rights violations. By special decree of the Secretary General of the United Nations, the UN is also facilitating inter-Tajik negotiations for the political resolution of the conflict between the Government of Tajikistan and its external opposition.

There are basically two opinions about economic development and conflict. One point of view holds that when the international community assists development, it helps reduce tensions in society. The basis of this assumption is that conflict is caused by poverty and competition over resources. If more resources were available, there would be less reason to fight. To this assumption is added a psychological factor; the more individuals and groups have to lose, the less likely they are to launch into warfare. It is a fact that mostly poor people engage in fighting. In the case of Tajikistan, representatives of the province of Kulob, which was the economically worst off part of the country, fought with those of Gharm and Badakhshan, which are the least industrial regions. The most serious battles took place in

¹Distributed by the Council on May 5, 1995.

Qorghan Teppa, where local communities had been fighting over resources ever since the Gharmis were forcibly moved to the region to work on cotton plantations in the 1940s. The war never reached the economically well off northern province of Leninobod (now called Khojend). If all the regions were equally industrialized, the above argument would say, then there would have been less reason to compete and engage in war.

But I challenge this assumption. Attempts to accelerate economic change can intensify already existing, and I stress this, tensions among different groups. Experience shows that even if poor people engage in fighting, and fight well, they are seldom those who actually start wars. They seldom have the resources necessary to begin an agitation. Not only Tajikistan's war, but many other conflicts also attest to the fact that well-off, power-hungry groups or individuals usually cash in on the dissatisfaction of disgruntled groups. Politically motivated people initiate wars, that are carried out by economically dissatisfied groups. In Tajikistan, for example, most of those who crowded the squares of the opposition camp in the Spring of 1992, had gathered because they had not been paid for a long time or were unemployed, but the leaders who stirred the increasingly political demands were technocrats of middle generations seeking to snatch power away from the Nomenclature. On the government side, the poorer Kulobis were promised positions and material gains by the Nomenclature from Leninobod who needed support to hold on to their rule.

Otherwise said, economic development does not necessarily prevent war, or lead to peace. The international community cannot stress development unless it seeks, at least at the same time as it promotes incentives for economic reforms, to resolve the conflict at hand. A question comes to mind as whether there really is a need for the international community to be present, and render assistance during a local conflict. In the case of civil wars, when local people are fighting each other, why can't they themselves solve their own problems and achieve peace? Some might argue, even in Tajikistan, that local parties know best how to achieve reconciliation, and that the mediation of third parties is not always seen as a sign of goodwill. In fact, President Rahmonov criticized the role of UN organizations supposedly acting on behalf of the opposition at the last session of the parliament (February 1996). He accused UN monitors of preventing what the Government identified as a potentially decisive move against the opposition in December in the Tavildara region, and of disseminating false information to the UN headquarters in New York. This paper will not dwell on whether the conflict can be resolved without the mediation of such competent organs as the Security Council, UNMOT or Boutros-Boutros Ghali's Special Envoy. What is important for the purposes of the argument presented here is that relief and development assistance calls for the

engagement of resources from outside of a conflict zone, but that political stability should precede development aid.

To repeat the argument, in the absence of reconciliation, brought about by internal or external factors, international assistance runs the risk of reinforcing tensions in the long run.

The most obvious reason is that the introduction of resources can increase competition and suspicion among different groups. Choosing specific groups for support creates more animosity against these groups. International organizations stress that they want to stay clear of taking positions in factions, but what they identify as vulnerable groups, using their own honest criteria, is not always what other warring factions would agree with. When two groups are at war, losers become 'vulnerable groups' for outsiders, but enemies for those engaged in the warfare. People at war with each other cannot be convinced that resources delivered to the enemy are justified. This is elementary. If people are already in conflict with each other, new resources create more suspicion. Thus, distribution of relief can have this very negative consequence. Warring groups will each try to get aid for their supporters, and if they fail, question why the other groups received assistance.

The same principle may hold true for non-warring factions as well. In Tajikistan, where in 1994 and 1995, people had not received salaries for months, the fact that the Ismaili people of Badakhshan were receiving good quality flour from the Agha Khan foundation caused to some resentment against the Ismaili community. Resentment is also evident in Qurghan Teppe, where UNHCR and a number of other organizations have successfully repatriated thousands of Gharmi refugees into old communities, and have provided them with roofing materials to rebuild their homes. Attention paid to these refugees has the potential of creating a feeling of resentment against people who had been forced out by their immediate neighbors in 1992. Had the local communities not engaged in competition since the 1940s, when the Gharmis were brought in and settled on the land, there would have been less fossilization of opposing identities, of regional and ethnic groups identifying themselves in defiance to each other. If there is no reconciliation between groups, relief and assistance potentially create more competition and resentment.

Another negative impact of relief is that it can potentially destroy local economic activity and reduce employment opportunities. It is not a secret that much aid ends up in bazaars. A number of potential problems associated with aid in bazaars includes the hiking up of prices which force local farmers to abandon production and engage in petty trade, and the fact itself that if aid is sold, it is not answering basic human needs of the recipients. Too much assistance also has the danger of rendering the population dependent, and lessening the chances

that they will find creative solutions to make ends meet. My research while conducting an economic survey in Tajikistan during the Summer of 1995 convinced me that the aid (mostly flour) that extended families received, they tended to consume within a month or less. What they toiled to produce for themselves, they kept in storage. Distribution of food and clothing are life saving contributions, but they do not answer the long term needs of people in Tajikistan. The regions where people received the most humanitarian aid, which of course were also the most mountainous regions where there was little land to develop (as in Badakhshan), also coincided with regions where people were less likely to think of working the land they may have had. If this trend continues in the long run, some regions may develop at a slower rate than others, leading to potential conflicts between them.

Another potentially negative consideration for the presence of the international community in times of conflict is that agencies, especially large ones such as the UN, have to work through existing regimes; cooperation in ways that show support for the legitimacy of a regime which has not achieved national reconciliation. At the same time, organizations that show support for groups that are seen as oppressed, such as those whose human rights have been violated, may also be unintentionally contributing to the will of these groups to continue to engage in conflict with the regime. In both cases, providing support for the legitimacy of one group or another encourages group formation, fossilization of negative attitudes, etc. In a worst case scenario, warring factions that have hope or expectation for material or moral support, may rather prolong conflicts rather than resolve them.

What is the international community to do? The dilemma is that the goodwill of organizations can actually perpetuate problems, and yet they cannot ignore their responsibility as organizations with a mandate and capacities to be involved in local attempts to make changes. An organization can either attempt to be involved, and be both criticized and praised at times, or it can stay completely out of the country and neglect to do the good of which it is capable.

To begin with, the international community must recognize the specificities of a society that has been through a civil war. War leaves scars that might be passed from generation to generation, especially in cultures such as in Tajikistan, where the concept of revenge is taken very seriously. Reconciliation between communities may involve more than just involving representatives of different ethnic/regional group in the same activity. Honest communication with the community at all levels is essential, as is an ability to listen and learn.

As far as economic assistance in the form of development is concerned, local communities in Tajikistan mostly know what they want, how feasible is their project, how

much it will cost, and how sustainable it is, even though they do not know how to express their concerns using the language understood by the international community, as, for example, "parameters" and "indicators". It is important to keep in mind that the society in Tajikistan, in addition to being post-war, is also post-Soviet and in transition. Which means that international organizations should study the experience of the administrative system of the Soviet period, as well as methods to deal with countries where poverty is not inherent, but the result of transition from one system to another. Stability, meanwhile, is the basis for the introduction of reforms and progress. Without stability and political security, questions of ownership and control, raised by development and privatization projects, can fall into the hands of the wrong elements, or at least, not very lasting elements of society.