By Ben West

Militants in Tajikistan's Rasht Valley ambushed a military convoy of 75 Tajik troops Sept. 19, killing 25 military personnel according to official reports and 40 according to the militants, who attacked from higher ground with small arms, automatic weapons and grenades. The Tajik troops were part of a nationwide deployment of security forces seeking to recapture 25 individuals linked to the United Tajik Opposition militant groups that had escaped from prison in Dushanbe on Aug. 24. The daring prison break was conducted by members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and saw five security guards killed and the country put on red alert. According to the Tajik government, after the escape, most of the militants fled to the Rasht Valley, an area under the influence of Islamist militants that is hard to reach for Tajikistan's security forces and thus rarely patrolled by troops.

Sunday's attack was one of the deadliest clashes between militants and the Tajik government since the Central Asian country's civil war ended in 1997. The last comparable attack was in 1998, when militants ambushed a battalion of Interior Ministry troops just outside Dushanbe, killing 20 and kidnapping 110. Sunday's incident was preceded by a Sept. 3 attack on a police station that involved a suicide operative and a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) in the northwest Tajik city of Khujand that killed four police officers. Suicide attacks are rare in Tajikistan, and VBIEDs even more so. The Khujand attack also stands out as it occurred outside militant territory. Khujand, Tajikistan's second-largest city after the capital, is located at the mouth of the Fergana Valley, the largest population center in Central Asia.

This represents a noticeable increase in the number and professionalism of militant operations in Tajikistan. Regardless of whether the September attacks can be directly linked to the Aug. 24 jailbreak in Dushanbe, the sudden re-emergence of attacks in Tajikistan after a decade of quiet in Central Asia deserves our attention. In short, something is percolating in the valleys of Central Asia that has reawakened militant groups more or less dormant for a decade. This unrest will likely continue and possibly grow if Tajik security forces can't get control of the situation.

**The Central Asian Core's Divided Geography**

Greater Central Asia, which encompasses southern Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and western China, comprises the northeastern frontier of the Muslim world. A knot of mountain ranges defines the geography of the region's core, which forms a buffer between the Chinese and Russian spheres of influence. The region's rugged terrain acts as a force multiplier for local populations seeking their own sovereignty, complicating foreign powers' efforts to control the region.

The Fergana Valley is the best-suited land in Central Asia for hosting a large population. Soviet

leader Josef Stalin split the valley up between the Soviet republics that would become the countries of Central Asia to ensure the region remained divided, however. Uzbekistan controls most of the basin itself; Tajikistan controls the most accessible entrance to the valley from the west; and Kyrgyzstan controls the high ground around the valley. Uzbekistan also controls several exclaves within Kyrgyzstan's portion of the valley, affording the Uzbek government and Uzbek citizens (including militants) access fairly deep into Kyrgyz territory. Meanwhile, the Rasht Valley follows the Vakhsh River across the Tajik-Kyrgyz border, giving locals (again including militants) a passage through the mountainous border region south of the Fergana Valley. These complex geographic and political divisions ensure that no one country can dominate Central Asia's core, and hence Central Asia itself.

**The Militants of Central Asia**

An often-confusing assortment of militant groups has called Central Asia home since the end of the Soviet Union, many of which have split or joined up with one another. The most significant players in the region's militant landscape include:

- Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP). Founded in 1990, it was the first Islamist political party to gain Soviet recognition. After it was banned throughout Central Asia in 1992, many of its members resorted to violence.

- Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). The Tajik branch of the IRP, the IRPT was active during the Tajik civil war of 1992-97 but has since turned to the political sphere.

- United Tajik Opposition (UTO). UTO was an umbrella organization for the groups that fought against the Moscow-backed Tajik government during the Tajik civil war, but most of its members turned to politics at the end of the war. UTO derived much of its strength from constituent Islamist groups like the IRP, but it also encompassed the Democratic Party of Tajikistan and the ethnic Gharmi group.

- Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). Founded in East Jerusalem in 1953, HT seeks to establish a worldwide caliphate. The group is present in more than 40 countries; its Central Asian base is Uzbekistan. The group promotes ideological extremism, though it does not directly engage in violence. Even so, the region's security forces have targeted it.

- Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). A militant Islamic group aligned with al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban, IMU was formed in 1998 after the UTO turned to politics. Its ultimate aim was to transform Uzbekistan into an Islamic state. IMU leaders since have spread to Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

- Islamic Jihad Union/Group (IJU). The IJU split off from IMU; it has a small presence in Europe.

- Movement for the Islamic Revival of Uzbekistan (MIRU). MIRU was formed in 1994 and was incorporated into the IMU in 1998.

- East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). A group primarily focused on independence for the northwestern Chinese region of Xinjiang, ETIM is thought to have ties with the IMU.

- Islamic Movement of Turkistan (IMT). Like ETIM, IMT is thought to have ties with the IMU.

## Islam and Militants in Central Asia

Historically, the moderate form of Islam known as Sufism predominated in Central Asia, with Salafism (a far more conservative form of Islam also called Wahhabism) being very much in the minority. Islam was strongly suppressed during Russian, and later Soviet, rule, however. Soviet security forces frequently raided mosques and madrassas, and Muslim religious leaders were routinely arrested. Generations of religious repression saw Sufism's role in the region decline as Central Asians became more secular. Salafism was able to capitalize on this vacuum as the Central Asian Soviet republics gained independence in 1991, aided materially and in manpower by their co-religionists beyond the Soviet sphere. Sufism, by contrast, was much more localized and could not draw on such resources.

By 1991, when Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan all got independence, many Salafists in Central Asia (and elsewhere) had incorporated violence into their ideology, classifying them as jihadists. With growing influence, groups like the IRPT (although banned in 1993) allied with secular opposition groups to fight the government during Tajikistan's five-year civil war. During this time, radical Islamists who turned to violence attacked Dushanbe from their bases in the Rasht and Tavildara valleys in northern Tajikistan as well as from Kunduz and Mazar-e-Sharif in northern Afghanistan, where they relied on the large population of Tajik-Afghans (some of whom had ties to the Taliban and al Qaeda) for support. After the civil war, many IRPT leaders joined the political process, leaving only a hardened remnant in the valleys to the north or in Afghanistan.

Later, the IMU began its campaign to bring down the Uzbek government in 1998. Uzbek President Islam Karimov used a heavy hand against the IMU and other Islamists. The IMU accordingly found it easier to operate in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, including the Uzbek exclaves of So'x and Shohimardon.

By 2000, militants faced government crackdowns throughout Central Asia, though they could still operate in Tajikistan and across the border in Afghanistan. The IMU, for example, was largely wiped out after 9/11 and the subsequent U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in the battle of Kunduz. The Taliban and IMU had decided to make a stand against the Northern Alliance and U.S. forces in Kunduz, but the Taliban withdrew, leaving the IMU to fend for itself. The IMU lost one of its two founding members and leaders, Juma Namangani, in the subsequent crushing defeat. While the IMU managed a few more large-scale attacks in Tashkent, including suicide attacks on the Israeli and U.S. embassies and the Uzbek prosecutor general's office in 2004, this did not signal a resurgence. Its remaining members relocated along with other fractured militant groups to northwestern Pakistan, where they took advantage of smuggling opportunities to raise funds. In August 2009, the IMU's other founder and leader, Tahir Yuldashev, died in a suspected U.S. missile strike in Pakistan. The involvement of Yuldashev and his fighters in the Islamist insurgency in Pakistan shows just how far the IMU had deviated from its original goal of toppling the Uzbek government. While the Uzbek and Tajik governments routinely blame attacks such as the Sept. 19 raid on the IMU, the group is no longer the coherent movement it was in the late 1990s.

## Islamist Militant Fragmentation

Now, governments frequently use the IMU as a catchall phrase for Islamists in Central Asia who would like to overthrow the regions' governments. In reality, various factors divide the region's militants, and continuing to use convenient labels like IMU frequently masks real shifts and complexities in Central Asia's militant landscape. These groups are divided by the particular conditions of their areas of operation, by ethnicity and tribe, and by their particular cause.

Groups like the IMU depend on commanders of militants in places like the Rasht, Tavildara or Fergana valleys to carry out the attacks. The situations in each valley are quite different. For example, the increasing Tajik military presence in the Rasht Valley means militant commanders there will have different missions from commanders in the Fergana Valley, to say nothing of the IMU members fighting NATO forces in Afghanistan or smuggling drugs in Pakistan. The name IMU to a large degree has become a generic label for Islamic militant activity in a similar fashion to how the devolution of al Qaeda has shifted the original understanding of the group and its name.

Ethnicity and tribal structures also complicate the picture. Central Asia is a hodge-podge of ethnicities, including Tajiks, Uzbeks, Kyrgyzs, Turkmen, Kazakhs and Uighurs. They speak different languages and have different customs, leading to highly localized, clan-based loyalties. Various groups and subgroups frequently cross national borders, making the activities of some factions more transnational in their ambitions or more interested in creating their own state rather than taking power from the government of the day.

And militants' shifting causes vary considerably. In hostile terrain like that of Central Asia, it is difficult enough to survive, much less adhere to consistent ideological goals. Groups like the IRPT frequently started as peaceful political groups, fractured, and then became more militant during the Tajik civil war, only to rejoin the political process.

**The Regional Outlook**

The past has shown that violence in one country can quickly spread to its neighbors. Thus, while Uzbekistan has largely mitigated the militant threat through strict security measures, it remains vulnerable due to its proximity to the chaotic countries of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and the geographically distorted borders around the Fergana Valley.

The Afghan question also looms large. With the United States and NATO set to begin withdrawing troops from Afghanistan in less than a year, Central Asian countries will face a much less restrained Taliban in Afghanistan. The Taliban's relative weakness in northern Afghanistan will mitigate this threat, but the region will nonetheless be in limbo after NATO withdraws. For their part, Central Asia's militants hope the Western withdrawal and the hoped-for Taliban rise to power will restore Afghanistan as a militant safe haven from which to pursue their home-country ambitions. And this prospect, of course, makes Central Asian governments quite uneasy.

Complicating matters, Russia is moving to protect its interests in Central Asia by moving up to 25,000 troops to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to increase security at its military installations there. Central Asian states are looking to balance their security needs in light of a destabilizing

Afghanistan by accepting more Russian troops.

Between increasing militant activity in Tajikistan after years of relative quiet, the impending Western withdrawal from Afghanistan and a resurgent Russia, Central Asia faces challenging times ahead.

Read more: The Tajikistan Attacks and Islamist Militancy in Central Asia | STRATFOR