
TAJIKISTAN ACCUSES IRAN OF ASSASSINATION CAMPAIGN IN FOREIGN POLICY GAMBIT

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Despite the close cultural connection that Tajikistan has with Iran, Dushanbe seems intent on burning all its diplomatic bridges with Tehran.

In a remarkably hostile gesture, Tajik state television in early August aired a sensationalist, 45-minute documentary produced by the Interior Ministry that accused Iran of orchestrating a slew of assassinations of high-profile public figures on Tajik soil during and after the civil war of the 1990s. In another carefully timed announcement, made around the same time as the release of the documentary, Tajikistan stated that it had paid off all its outstanding debts to Iran, and demonstratively spurned Tehrans overtures to patch up relations.

The Interior Ministry documentary, which has also been posted on YouTube, is largely based on accounts provided by three men – Abdukodir Abdulloyev, Tagoimurod Ashrapov and Saimuhriddin Kudratov – who claim to have carried out Irans instructions during the waning years of the civil war, which formally ended in 1997.

In 1995, I was sent to Iran via Ashgabat to undergo saboteur training. The exercises involved about 200 people and took place in [the cities of] Gorgan and Qom. There, we learned to use automatic rifles, handguns, grenades, machine guns and grenade throwers. After training, we returned to Tajikistan, Ashrapov said in the documentary.

Despite the seriousness of their alleged actions, none of the three men were known to the general public before the films release.

According to the narrative outlined in the documentary, Tehran was coordinating its killing campaign through Abduhalim Nazarzoda, a former defense minister accused of mounting an alleged attempted coup in September 2015. Reprising earlier accusations, Tajik authorities described Nazarzoda and all his alleged accomplices as members of the banned opposition Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, or IRPT, thereby casting the plot against Dushanbe as a shadowy alliance of Sunni and Shia radicals seeking the overthrow of the government.

Chatter about Iran supporting Tajikistans opposition has been commonplace for many years, but whispered speculation has only evolved into candid accusations relatively recently. Iran incurred Tajikistans profound rage in December 2015, when it invited exiled IRPT leader Muhiddin Kabiri to attend a religious-themed conference in Tehran. That event was held only three months after the IRPT was officially banned in Tajikistan.

Iran has always spoken of Tajikistan as a brotherly nation with a shared faith and culture. How is it

then possible to welcome a terrorist? a representative for Tajikistans State Committee for Religious Affairs, Abdugafor Yusupov, said in early 2016.

The would-be perpetrators shown in the Interior Ministry documentary apologize for being IRPT members and urge young people not to fall for the partys propaganda. Some IRPT leaders have been jailed, but many younger members have succeeded in fleeing abroad and are lobbying foreign governments to punish the Tajik government for its rights violations.

The Interior Ministry documentary also maintains that Iranian-backed operatives were responsible for the killing of officers with the Russian 201st Motor Rifle Division, whose men are stationed in Tajikistan to this day. This particular strategy was described as an attempt to push Moscow out of the picture.

Irans aim was to displace representatives of the 201st division and to bring their own armed forces in instead. They wanted to turn us into an Islamic state, Abdulloyev stated in the documentary. The witnesses state specifically that on Nazarzodas instructions they killed former parliamentary speaker Safarali Kenjayev in March 1999, in return for a payment of \$2,000 apiece.

Others purported to have been targets of the supposedly Iranian-inspired campaign were BBC reporter and photographer Muhiddin Olimpur, journalist and politician Otahon Latifi, scientists Muhammad Osimi, Yusuf Ishaki and Minhoja Gulyamov, and writer and director Saif Rahim Afardi.

There are some obvious weaknesses in the Interior Ministry account.

According to the widely accepted biography of Nazarzoda, for instance, the former deputy defense minister spent much of the civil war doing business in Kazakhstan. He only returned to his home country after the conflict subsided.

Also, the Tajik government has earlier laid the blame for some of the most high-profile killings on a man called Yusuf Jalilov, the bodyguard of prominent religious leader Haji Akbar Turajonzoda. Jalilov was deemed guilty of killing, among other people, Olimpur and around 15 Russian servicemen. He was amnestied for those crimes in compliance with the 1997 peace deal, but was later jailed on other offenses committed after the war.

Although it has previously been reported that Tajik authorities believe Jalilov may have received weapons training in Afghanistan and Iran, the link to Tehran as the initiator of the killings has never been made so explicitly.

It has not been possible to immediately establish Jalilovs current whereabouts.

Officials in Iran, acting via the Iranian Embassy in Dushanbe, have reportedly demanded an official explanation for the film.

As if to further underline its break with Tehran, Tajikistans Finance Ministry in early August announced that it had managed, from 2015 to 2017, to pay off all its outstanding debts to Iran, as well as to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. No figures were provided, although the Asia-Plus news agency suggested, citing figures from July 2016, that the amount was relatively small – around \$1.5 million.

The relentless deepening of Tajikistans hostility toward Iran is accompanied by Dushanbes ongoing campaign to enamor itself of nations like Saudi Arabia, a fierce foe of Iran. The apparent

aim of this charm offensive is to secure investment and aid.

As it happens, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon spoke with Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud by telephone as recently as July 22. While Iran was not mentioned directly in official statements, the language in the official Tajik readout implies that the topic of Tajik-Iranian ties was discussed. The two parties exchanged views about the worrying situation in the Middle East, including the unfolding state of affairs in the Persian Gulf region, a statement on the Tajik presidential website read.

Tajikistan currently gets funds from Saudi Arabia to support educational projects, but Dushanbe clearly hopes to obtain much larger sums for a project critical for its financial future. The chairman of the lower house of parliament, Shukurjon Zuhurov, was channeling the official position in January when he urged Saudi Arabia to invest funds in the planned construction of the gigantic Rogun hydroelectric plant. Zuhurov made the remarks after meeting with the Saudi deputy finance minister.

Rogun could potentially generate a sizeable income for Tajikistan through the export of electricity, but completion of the dam remains doubtful due to the lack of foreign investors, as well as Dushanbes chronic near-insolvency.

Dushanbe-based political analyst Abdugani Madazimov speculated that the final break with Iran may have occurred in the very recent past. In an incongruous decision, Tajikistan dispatched its Energy and Water Resources Minister, Usmonali Usmonzoda, of all people, to attend Iranian President Hassan Rouhanis inauguration on August 5.

I think this film was released after the water resources minister went to the inauguration, Madazimov said. What this tells us was that they were unable to come to an understanding.

All bets for Roguns eventual completion are now seemingly being placed on Riyadh. If Saudi Arabia were to step in – still a long-shot possibility – ditching an on-again/off-again relationship with Iran would be a small price to pay for Dushanbe.

Kaynak/Source: