

Civic Solidarity Platform Working Group on the Fight Against Torture
Civic Solidarity Platform Turkmenistan Working Group
Crude Accountability

ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES IN TAJIKISTAN



Prepared by Steve Swerdlow
and USC Human Rights Advocacy Group

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About the Project

In 2022-2023, Crude Accountability, in cooperation with members of the [Turkmenistan Working Group](#) and the [Working Group on the Fight Against Torture](#) of the [Civic Solidarity Platform](#) (CSP), initiated a project to research the issue of enforced disappearances in the region of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

With generous funding from [Austausch, e.V.](#), a German human rights NGO, the project focuses on the issue of enforced disappearances within the context of the OSCE December 2020 decision, which was adopted by consensus at the Ministerial Council Meeting in Tirana, Albania in December 2020, for an [expanded OSCE commitment on torture prevention](#). This commitment includes the fight against enforced disappearances and incommunicado detention.

Focusing on the Balkans, Belarus, Chechnya, Nagorno-Karabakh, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Ukraine, the project draws attention to the ongoing horrors of enforced disappearances in the context of conflict and repression. The Balkans, Chechnya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Ukraine provide examples of enforced disappearances in conflict zones—both as a tool of regimes and armies, and as a product of war. Belarus, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan are examples of regimes that use enforced disappearance as a tool of repression, even in peacetime. However, the use of enforced disappearances in all seven regions is one that is related to repression, as our policy papers demonstrate.

About Crude Accountability

Crude Accountability is a non-profit organization committed to defending the human rights and environment of communities affected by oil and gas development in the Caspian and the Black Sea regions. Crude Accountability works to hold governments and corporations accountable for their actions and advocate for sustainable and just energy practices. For more information, please visit Crude Accountability's website at <https://crudeaccountability.org>

About Civic Solidarity Platform

Civic Solidarity Platform is a network of human rights NGOs, activists, and experts from across Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The platform collaborates to promote and protect human rights, democratic principles, and civil society participation within the OSCE region. For more information, visit <https://www.civicsolidarity.org/>

About the Authors

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Steve Swerdlow

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In 2023, Swerdlow served as Senior Advisor to former UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion Ahmed Shaheed, authoring a comprehensive report on freedom of religion in Uzbekistan, and earlier in October 2021, was the author of book-length report for Congress on political and religious prisoners also in Uzbekistan. Swerdlow was Senior Central Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch from 2010-2019, founding its Kyrgyzstan field office, heading up its Tajikistan and Uzbekistan research, and earlier was based in Kazakhstan.

Swerdlow has worked with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the International Labour Organization (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IOM), the PeaceNexus Foundation, and Internews. Swerdlow was a fellow in the U.S. State Department's Young Leaders for Public Service program in Russia (Krasnodar) and also worked as the human rights monitor for the Union of Council for Soviet Jews (UCSJ) in the South Caucasus. Swerdlow practiced law in San Francisco at Lieff Cabraser Heimann & Bernstein, LLP, and served as law clerk to the Honorable Judge Dean Pregerson of the United States District Court for the Central District of California. Swerdlow publishes regularly on human rights issues in Eurasia and US foreign policy.

Swerdlow received his J.D. (Juris Doctor) from the University of California, Berkeley School of Law and M.A. in International Affairs from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs with a certificate in Post-Soviet Studies from the Harriman Institute. Swerdlow speaks Russian, Uzbek, and has studied Ukrainian and Georgian.

Summary

Tajikistan's atrocious human rights record has come into sharp focus through multiple United Nations human rights mechanisms and UN special rapporteurs, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) human dimension meetings, media and US State Department reports, and resolutions of the European Parliamentⁱ over the past several years, as the government has steadily escalated its full-scale assault on civil society and free expression in and outside the country. Growing attention has been paid to and serious concern expressed about Tajikistan's use of transnational repressionⁱⁱ against perceived government critics abroad and more recently the government's violent crackdown on the Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous region (GBAO) and the ethno-linguistic religious minority Pamiris who reside there.ⁱⁱⁱ However, far less attention has been directed toward the international crime of enforced disappearances and the closely related abuse of incommunicado detention, which the government has increasingly used as systematic and widespread tools of repression over the past decade.

Part of an overall policy report about enforced disappearances in seven regions of the OSCE, this policy paper aims to provide policymakers with an overview of the rapidly worsening situation regarding enforced disappearances and incommunicado detention in Tajikistan, presenting over two dozen individual representative cases over the past two decades, even though the actual number of cases is far higher. The paper also makes recommendations for action following the adoption of the OSCE MC decision 7/20 on the Prevention and Eradication of Torture in December 2020.

One of the few remaining OSCE states that has neither signed nor ratified the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED), Tajikistan has widely and systematically engaged in the practice of enforced disappearances and incommunicado detention since independence in 1991—an abuse that has been perpetrated with increasing frequency since a precipitous decline in the country's human rights situation in 2012-2015.

As this paper illustrates, the practice of enforced disappearances and incommunicado detention first gained traction during the country's civil war (1992-1997), but estimates on the numbers of disappeared during the war are extraordinarily hard to calculate. A 2019 visit by the UN Working Group on Enforced Disappearances highlighted the government's lack of political will to soberly engage with and examine the brutal history of the civil war or to bring about justice for the relatives of the disappeared after its conclusion.^{iv} Tajikistan's authoritarian President Emomali Rahmon introduced the tool of enforced disappearances selectively in the initial post-Civil War period, pressuring his political opponents (2002-2012).

As Rahmon consolidated his full hold on power after roughly a decade, and observing the government could commit the abuse largely with impunity, Tajik authorities introduced enforced disappearances and incommunicado detention more regularly in response to what Rahmon perceived as existential political threats from peaceful opposition movements like the "Group 24" political movement abroad and the

registered moderate and democratically-oriented Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). This repressive decade transformed Tajikistan into one of the most repressive and totalitarian states in the world. By 2022, when the government launched a full-scale crackdown in GBAO in the east, enforced disappearances and incommunicado detention had already become integrated as a routine feature of Tajikistan's criminal justice system.

While by far not an exhaustive list of all cases, **this paper collects approximately 30 individual enforced disappearance cases** split into roughly **three historical periods which represent larger trends of repression and categories beyond the Civil War period**: first, a period of “practicing” authoritarian repression between roughly 2002 and 2012 when President Rahmon was testing this abuse on a wide array of perceived opponents, second, the period marked by methodical campaigns to eliminate opposition Group 24 and the IRPT, stretching from 2012-2022; and third, the present time, 2022-onward, during which almost an equal or greater number of enforced disappearances and cases of incommunicado detention have been documented against Pamiris as all of the previous years combined.

The targets of enforced disappearances and incommunicado detention span a wide spectrum but include primarily members of **Group 24** (and its related organization **Youth for the Revival of Tajikistan**), the **IRPT, journalists, lawyers, general opposition figures** and **perceived government critics, foreign researchers, and Pamiri activists, cultural, and sports figures**. Many of these cases occurred **transnationally**, involving kidnappings, forced returns, extraditions, and violent rendition from the territories of **Russia, Turkey**, or other countries. By implication, these cases demonstrate the complicity and **state responsibility** of other OSCE states in enforced disappearances. Also, disturbingly, an increasing number of cases which involve enforced disappearances or incommunicado detention involve forced return from **EU countries such as Austria, Poland, Germany, or Slovakia** who returned Tajik asylum-seekers to Tajikistan despite credible and well-documented evidence of the risk of torture.

The astounding number and increasing speed with which enforced disappearances and incommunicado detentions occur in Tajikistan requires **urgent action** on the part of OSCE member states, UN mechanisms, all of Tajikistan's international partners, international financial institutions, and other interested institutions and actors. In addition, the Recommendations section of this paper argues for a **transnational response** that accounts for Tajikistan's coordination with other states in the commission of this international crime.

Legal framework

Tajikistan is party to various treaties and legal instruments that are relevant to enforced disappearances, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Tajikistan ratified on January 4, 1999,^v and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), which Dushanbe ratified on January 11, 1995.^{vi} While it has ratified both the ICCPR and the CAT, unlike many other countries in the OSCE, Tajikistan has not signed or ratified the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED),^{vii} the key international instrument that establishes measures for investigating and prosecuting those responsible for enforced disappearances.

Tajikistan's lack of signature or ratification of the Convention reflects the general human rights "vacuum" that exists with regard to the commission of egregious and severe human rights violations that occur now with alarming frequency and show a lack of commitment to mitigate the problem of enforced disappearances. Following criticism on the issue from several delegations at the Universal Periodic Review of Tajikistan, the government included signing and ratification of the Convention into its 2017-2020 National Plan of Action,^{viii} but has yet to act on this.

Tajikistan's criminal law contains no autonomous crime of enforced disappearances. While some legislative amendments to the criminal procedure code were adopted in 2016 that relate to the registration of those deprived of liberty and the notification of family members, these provisions could be further improved and are often not effectively implemented.^{ix}

Note on Incommunicado Detention

Article 2 of the ICPPED defines an enforced disappearance as "the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law."^x

While not of a "continuing" nature like the crime of enforced disappearance, the closely related abuse of "incommunicado detention" is often at its core, and UN human rights mechanisms have repeatedly reaffirmed the position that "prolonged incommunicado detention may facilitate the perpetration of torture and can in itself constitute a form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or even torture."^{xi}

In addition to "pure" enforced disappearances, this paper's analysis also includes cases where a disappearance has been concluded, e.g, the location or whereabouts of the detainee previously disappeared has been established. Incommunicado detention is generally understood as a situation of detention in which an individual is denied access to family members, an attorney, or an independent physician. In some cases, as in Tajikistan or where detention occurs on behalf of Tajik authorities in Russia

or Turkey, incommunicado detainees are kidnapped and do not even have the right to notify anyone about their arrest. While there is no prohibition under international law of incommunicado detention per se, there is significant consensus among United Nations human rights bodies that it can give rise to serious human rights violations and should thus be prohibited. Thus, this paper views incommunicado detention in Tajikistan as inextricably linked to the crime of enforced disappearances and the overall practice of torture.^{xii}

Enforced Disappearances during Tajikistan’s Civil War

To understand the problem of enforced disappearances in Tajikistan, it is necessary to examine the origins of the practice and to discuss in what context enforced disappearances were originally introduced. Similar to enforced disappearances in Ukraine, the Balkans, and Chechnya, enforced disappearances first appeared systematically in Tajikistan during the country’s bloody civil war, fought between 1992 and 1997 following the collapse of the Soviet Union and Tajikistan’s independence in 1991.

The causes of the civil war are varied and complex, and beyond the scope of the present analysis, but stem from entrenched struggles for political power between various groups and interethnic as well as religious divisions exacerbated by severe economic hardship in the wake of the Soviet collapse. During the war, violent conflict between government-backed forces and opposition groups resulted in an estimated 35,000 to 157,000 deaths, and the displacement of millions, both within and outside Tajikistan.^{xiii} To date no systematic study has been undertaken to establish the numbers of those subjected to enforced disappearances during the war and the government has never allowed any systematic research on the issue.

2019 Visit of UN Working Group on Enforced Disappearances

In 2019, the United Nations Working Group on Enforced Disappearances to Tajikistan visited the country to report on the status of the legacy of disappearances during the civil war and beyond.^{xiv} Stressing that it was unable to obtain any official figures on the numbers of forced disappearances during the conflict, the Working Group stated that the civil war remains “virtually unaddressed” in the country and that it believes “thousands” may still be unaccounted for from different factions. The Working Group also received reports on the existence of a number of unopened mass graves dating back to the civil war period. Nevertheless, experts said, with the exception of a trivial amount of compensation granted to the families of soldiers and some psychosocial support for relatives coordinated by ICRC, “very little has been done to deal with issues related to truth, justice, reparation and memory in relation to the serious human rights violations, including enforced disappearances.”^{xv}

Specifically with respect to enforced disappearances committed during the civil war the Working Group urged Tajikistan to create conducive conditions to openly and comprehensively address issues related to

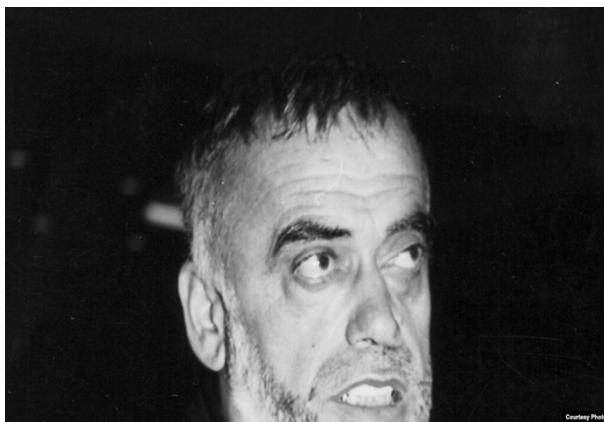
past violations, including enforced disappearances, including the development of a strategy for the collection of data, search and identification of those unaccounted for, and exhumation of remains. Accordingly, forensic capacities should be strengthened including the creation of a DNA bank and additional DNA laboratories.^{xvi}

Cases of Enforced Disappearance and Incommunicado Detention: Chronology and Analysis

Enforced Disappearances following the Civil War: 2002-2012

As President Rahmon entered his second decade in power, his government began selectively using enforced disappearances and incommunicado detention to undermine and weaken the political opposition, independent media, and independent religious groups. Under 1997's power-sharing arrangement, opposition parties are guaranteed 30 percent of top government posts.^{xvii} However, throughout the course of this second decade in power, Rahmon steadily replaced senior government officials from other political parties with members of his own party, *Hizbi Demokrati-Khalkii Tojikston* (the People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan), reducing the other parties' share of top posts to 5 percent.^{xviii} The June 2003 presidential referendum (allowing Rahmon to stand for another two seven-year terms as president) was marred by allegations of vote fraud, and repression increased in advance of the 2005 parliamentary and presidential elections—a pattern that would only play out more dramatically in each subsequent election as the decade wore on. While not systematic in this initial period, enforced disappearances and incommunicado detention were committed with impunity, setting the stage for larger-scale crackdowns.

Shamsuddin Shamsuddinov (2003, IRPT)



In June 2003, the International Secretariat of the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT) published an urgent intervention regarding the enforced disappearance of Shamsuddin Shamsuddinov, a deputy chairman of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), who was arrested by unknown persons at his home on May 30, 2003, and brought to an unknown location as he shouted his name to individuals in the vicinity.^{xix} He was last seen, according to the IRPT's press secretary Hikmatullo Saifullozoda (now imprisoned

himself since 2015), at the Chkalovsk airport before being taken to a detention facility in Dushanbe. There Mr. Shamsuddinov was permitted neither family visits nor access to a lawyer, giving rise to serious

concerns that he was tortured. In January 2004, the Supreme Court sentenced Shamsuddinov to sixteen years in prison on charges of polygamy, organizing an armed criminal group during the civil war, and illegally crossing the border. Shamsuddinov, who maintained his innocence since his arrest, alleged he was beaten and tortured with electric shocks while awaiting trial.^{xx} Shamsuddinov died in prison on January 30, 2008 under circumstances supporters said appeared orchestrated by authorities.

Mukhammadruzi Iskandarov (2005, Russia)



On April 15, 2005, Mukhammadruzi Iskandarov, leader of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan was unlawfully apprehended by unknown individuals in Moscow, and held in incommunicado detention for two days.^{xxi} On April 17, he was unlawfully brought to Tajikistan by plane, and immediately placed in custody at the detention center of the Ministry of Security in Dushanbe. Kept in incommunicado detention and isolation for ten days, Iskandarov was provided only with bread and water during this period and contracted a skin disease. Authorities rebuffed his requests for medical care and ignored his requests to see his lawyer. Following a press conference announcing his arrest Iskandarov's family inquired about his whereabouts at the Ministry of Security, but told by authorities Iskandarov was not being held there—a classic tactic of denial that often accompanies this abuse. Authorities interrogated Iskandarov outside the presence of an attorney, during which he confessed to all charges against him. On October 5, 2005, a Dushanbe court sentenced him to 23 years.

Nizomkhon Juraev (2012, Russia)



One of the most prominent disappearance case from this initial period was that of Nizomkhon Juraev, a prominent businessman and owner of a chemical plant in Tajikistan's northern Sughd region who was charged with a variety of trumped-up charges of organized violent crimes and weapons possession after a falling out with President Rahmon and his relatives.^{xxii} Fleeing to Moscow, Juraev was pursued by Tajik security services, who persuaded Russian authorities to detain him. Russian human rights activists successfully appealed to the European Court of Human Rights for interim measures to prevent Juraev's extradition, citing credible fears he would be tortured, and Juraev was subsequently released from

Russian custody. Shortly thereafter, Juraev went missing only to resurface later in Tajikistan. Within a few days, a video of him appeared on Tajikistan’s State TV where he stated he returned to the country of “his own free will,” and to care for his elderly mother. Among others, his lawyer disputed the characterization that he had returned voluntarily because, she said, at the time of his disappearance she had possession of his passport. There were also credible reports that Juraev was imprisoned in Tajikistan, and that his relatives and workers at his companies were tortured.^{xxiii}

Abdulvosi Latipov (2012, Russia)



Federal Security Service officers detained Abdulvosi Latipov, a member of the United Tajik Opposition (UPO), in Russia in November 2010 following an extradition request by the Tajik authorities.^{xxiv} When Latipov’s request for asylum in Russia was refused, his legal representative in Russia filed an application with the European Court of Human Rights, which issued interim measures in December 11 under

Rule 39 which required the Russian Federation to refrain from deporting Latipov until his case has been fully considered by the Court. Reportedly, he was released from detention on October 15, 2012 and days later forcibly taken from an apartment he had been residing in by unidentified armed men wearing masks. Relatives reported that he was sent back by plane to Tajikistan and then held incommunicado in an apartment in Dushanbe.^{xxv}

Alexander Sodiqov (2014)



An excerpt from a heavily edited televised interrogation by Tajik security services of Alexander Sodiqov, a doctoral researcher from Canada, detained on espionage charges in 2014 and temporarily held in incommunicado detention. © YouTube 2014.

Alexander Sodiqov, a researcher and doctoral student at the University of Toronto, traveled to Tajikistan in June 2014 to conduct research for the University of

Exeter.^{xxvi} On June 15, Sodiqov traveled to Khorog to interview civil society representatives. On June 16, security services apprehended him during an interview with Alim Sherzamonov, the head of the local branch of the Social-Democratic Party of Tajikistan (SDPT), in Khorog. After the detention, Sodiqov's whereabouts were uncertain for at least the next 24 hours.^{xxvii} The next day he was transported to the security services office in Dushanbe.

On June 17, 2014, security services publicly stated Sodiqov had been detained for collecting information that “undermined national security” and was working for an unnamed “foreign intelligence service.” Within the next several days, Sodiqov appeared at least twice on national television in a heavily edited video aimed at discrediting him. Security services charged him under Article 305 of Tajikistan's Criminal Code (“high treason”), which carries a sentence of between 12 and 20 years, placed him in pre-trial detention, classifying his case as “top secret.”

Sodiqov's arrest on espionage and treason charges generated international outcry, with many rights groups and watchdogs calling for information, fair treatment, and his release.^{xxviii} Amnesty International called Sodiqov a “prisoner of conscience” and claimed that charges laid against him were “politically motivated.” On July 22, 2014, after more than a month in detention, Sodiqov was released and then on September 10 finally allowed to return to his studies in Canada, although Tajikistan did not drop the charges against him.^{xxix}

Enforced Disappearances as a Systematic Practice (2012-2022)

While Tajikistan remained poor and its infrastructure had been devastated in many respects at the end of the civil war, the country's vibrant NGO sector, creative journalists, and an active opposition helped Tajikistan's society remain decidedly more open than its neighboring Uzbekistan, which had become a hardcore authoritarian regime under Islam Karimov. But as Rahmon further amassed personal power, he introduced his children and other relatives into positions of power, giving them key levers of control over the country's fledgling economy. As Rahmon grew more paranoid and fearful of losing his tight grip on power, Tajikistan's human rights record took a precipitous turn for the worse between 2012-2015.

Dushanbe intensified its crackdown on all manifestations of perceived criticism, in particular, political opposition activists in the country and abroad, as well in GBAO where Tajik government forces led a bloody incursion in 2012. In this period, Tajik authorities began using enforced disappearances, incommunicado detention, and transnational repression in a systematic and widespread fashion. The main targets of the government's crackdown were members of Group 24, an opposition movement mainly based outside the country led by businessman Umarali Kuvvatov, who was himself assassinated in Istanbul in March 2015, and the country's largest registered opposition party, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT).

Since 2014-2015, the Tajik government has aggressively targeted numerous peaceful political activists living abroad, seeking their extradition, often in connection with INTERPOL, with Tajik authorities

implicated in enforced disappearances, torture, and at least one extrajudicial killing. When forcibly returned to the country, authorities have often subjected peaceful activists to prolonged periods of incommunicado detention and sentenced them to lengthy prison sentences on politically motivated charges.

Those targeted are largely members of now outlawed peaceful opposition parties but also include ordinary citizens who have criticized the government or President Rahmon on social media. Tajikistan's security services, operating alongside local authorities abroad, have targeted activists and perceived critics inside Russia, Turkey, Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. Within the country, authorities banned the IRPT, jailing its entire leadership, and hundreds of its up to 43,000 members.

Nematullo Kurbonov (2014)

Colleagues of Nematullo (aka Hakikatparvar) Kurbonov, a Youth for the Revival of Tajikistan (YRT) activist, told rights groups that he disappeared after returning to Tajikistan from Russia on or around October 10, 2014. He had been charged with anti-constitutional activity (article 307). Activists believe that he was forcibly disappeared by Tajik authorities and may be in a detention facility, although his whereabouts remain unknown.^{xxx}

Ehson Odinaev (2015, Russia)

On May 19, 2015, Ehson Odinaev, 24, an outspoken critic of the Tajik government, left his apartment in Russia and has not been seen since. He was also a member of Group 24 and Youth of Tajikistan for Revival (YRT) and very active in social media, under the nickname "Sarfarozi Olamafruz." Several months earlier, Tajik authorities had declared him wanted on charges of unspecified "cybercrimes," registering his case with Interpol. For several months before his disappearance, he told friends and family that he was under surveillance and noticed that he was sometimes followed.

After his disappearance, Odinaev's brother discovered that his brother's apartment in Novosibirsk contained bugging devices. Odinaev's relatives have repeatedly reported his disappearance to Russian and Tajik authorities but have been unable to get any information regarding his whereabouts for over eight years. They fear he was forcibly disappeared by Tajik authorities, returned to Tajikistan, and is being held incommunicado there or has been killed.^{xxxi} When this author interviewed his mother about the case, she stated that Ehson had been disappeared by Tajik authorities simply because he desired freedom for his country.

Maksud Ibragimov (2015, Russia)



YRT leader Maksud Ibragimov in a Moscow hospital after being stabbed on the street late 2014. © Group 24

On July 24, 2015, a Dushanbe court sentenced Maksud Ibragimov, a peaceful youth activist and the Youth for the Revival of Tajikistan (YRT) leader, to 17 years on charges of extremism following a deeply flawed trial. He is a Russian citizen and lived in Moscow for more than 10 years. He was detained in Russia in October 2014, on a Tajik extradition request, but then released. In November 2014, unidentified assailants stabbed him six times on a Moscow street.

On January 20, 2015, his relatives reported that police from Moscow's Preobrazhenskaya district detained him, took him to a police station, and told him to write a statement about the stabbing. Witnesses reported that as soon as he left the police station, several unidentified people kidnapped him, drove him to the airport, and forced him onto a plane to Dushanbe, where he was arrested when he landed. Ibragimov told his lawyer later that he had been tortured into telling the Tajik media that he had returned to Tajikistan voluntarily.^{xxxii}

Buzurgmehr Yorov (2015)



Buzurgmehr Yorov, a human rights lawyer arrested in September 2015 for his legal representation of the banned Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), is one of Tajikistan's most prominent political prisoners, serving a 28-year sentence on various, politically-motivated charges.^{xxxiii}

Yorov's imprisonment has included a wide span of rights violations in the past eight years, including torture and denial of medical treatment, and has been recognized as arbitrary and unlawful by the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. In November 2022, Yorov was transferred to SIZO No. 1, correctional colony 9/1 in Dushanbe where he was held incommunicado for nearly a month before his wife was allowed to visit him. During this visit, bruising was visible on Yorov's neck and face.^{xxxiv}

Savrinisso Jurayeva and Firuz Hayit, wife and son of Mahmadali Hayit (2016)



Another notable case in this period concerns the disappearance in August 2016 of the wife and son of the jailed deputy leader of the banned Islamic Renaissance Party, Mahmadali Hayit, following revelations that he had been severely beaten in prison and was pleading to see his relatives. The BBC's Russian service reported on August 22, citing Hayit's relatives, that a group of people barged their way into the house where Savrinisso Jurayeva lives with her 17-year son Firuz Hayit. "Several people in civilian clothing used force to get into Mahmadali Hayit's apartment, ransacked the place, and then took away his wife and son. They told them that they were taking them away to a precinct of the State Committee for National Security (GKNB). They refused to introduce themselves or show their documents. Nobody knows now where [Hayit's] wife and son are or

what has happened to them," one relative told the BBC Russian service.

The GKNB denied having anything to do with Jurayeva and Firuz Hayit's disappearance. Jurayeva's phone was turned off and unreachable during her reported kidnapping. Another son, a 14-year old suffering from liver problems, was left behind at their home. Hayit's wife and son were eventually released. Both of Hayit's sons subsequently fled Tajikistan and have received asylum in a European country.

Djovijon Khakimov (2017)

In a case that illustrates how incommunicado detention is also used in non-political prosecutions as a regular feature of Tajikistan's criminal justice system, the UN Human Rights Committee noted its serious concern with the practice in its Concluding Observations following Tajikistan's review. Mukhabbat Davlatova told the Coalition against Torture that her son Djovijon Khakimov was arrested in their home on January 3, 2017 and taken to the division for fighting organized crime in Tajikistan's Ministry of Internal Affairs in Dushanbe. He was held incommunicado and without charge until he was taken to a temporary police detention facility on January 9, where his detention was officially registered. The remand hearing took place on January 11, over a week after he was reportedly taken into custody. Djovijon was tortured while in incommunicado detention, but his lawyer's request of January 12 for a prompt medical examination was never satisfied.^{xxxv}

Namunjon Sharipov (2018, Turkey, IRPT)



On February 16, 2018, Tajik officials took custody of Namunjon Sharipov, 55, a well-known businessman and member of the banned IRPT who had lived in Turkey since fleeing Tajikistan in 2015. Tajik officials took him from an Istanbul migration detention facility where he had been held for 11 days at their behest.^{xxxvi} They forced him on a plane to Tajikistan, where he was charged with terrorism-related crimes for peacefully exercising his freedom of expression.^{xxxvii} On February 20, Sharipov resurfaced in Dushanbe and called Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Tajik service and made a statement that he had "returned voluntarily" to the country, was "freely going about his affairs," and denied

reports that he had been forcibly returned. But Sharipov's relatives in Tajikistan reported to his lawyer and activists outside the country that Sharipov is in detention in the capital, had no access to a phone, and was being forced to make such statements. After months of detention and reaching an agreement not to resume political activities, Sharipov was eventually released from custody.

Naimjon Samiev (IRPT, Russia-Chechnya, 2018)



On April 9 2019, journalists and human rights defenders became aware that a court in Tajikistan had sentenced Naimjon Samiev, a former member of the banned Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), to 15 years in prison after a controversial extremism trial.^{xxxviii} The April 9 ruling at a hearing in the northern city of Khujand followed Samiev's forced return in late 2018 from

Russia to Tajikistan under murky circumstances, with sources reporting he had been disappeared by Russian and Tajik authorities. Samiev was convicted of illegal weapons possession, organization of an extremist group, and participation in the activities of a criminal group. Samiev disappeared in December 2018 in Grozny, the capital of Russia’s North Caucasus region of Chechnya, and relatives learned days later that he was in a detention center in Tajikistan. In February 2019, Samiev was shown on state-run television saying that he returned to Tajikistan “of his own will” and surrendered to the Tajik police. There are numerous cases featured in this report where people in custody are forced to make such appearances. Samiev, 56, was the leader of the IRPT branch in the northern city of Isfara in 2012-14.^{xxxix}

Shobudin Badalov (2020, Russia)



In the Russian city of Nizhny Novgorod in 2020 several assailants captured Group 24 activist Shobudin Badalov, an activist who had lived in Russia for several years and had openly criticized the policies of Tajikistan’s president Rahmon at a series of pickets.^{xi} Badalov was missing for several weeks until he resurfaced in Dushanbe and is believed to be currently in custody.^{xii}

Sharofiddin Gadoev (2019, Russia)



In February 2019, Tajik and Russian officials arbitrarily detained and forcibly returned to Tajikistan Sharofiddin Gadoev, a member of Tajikistan’s opposition National Alliance and the former deputy head of the banned Group 24 opposition political movement, while he was visiting Moscow from his home in the Netherlands, where he had received political asylum.^{xiii} “I was forced into a minivan by eight-nine Russian security service officials. They taped my mouth shut, put a hood over my head and beat me. During the hours I spent blindfolded at the hands of the Russian security services, I thought they were going to kill me,” said Gadoev to human rights groups after his release. On February 15, 2019, Tajikistan’s Interior Ministry announced that he had flown from Moscow to Dushanbe of his own accord to “surrender” to authorities at the airport for various crimes. Gadoev was taken into custody and detained when the plane landed. For several successive days after his arrival the government displayed Gadoev in a series of orchestrated videos and photographs in

which he was seen meeting with his mother, sister, and other acquaintances. In the videos, Gadoev states that he returned to Tajikistan of his own free will and denounced other opposition figures. But Gadoev's relatives and other sources reported that Russian and Tajik authorities used physical force to detain him in Moscow and forced him onto the plane. They say Gadoev's statements on camera were made under duress through physical and psychological pressure. Following international pressure, Gadoev was freed and allowed to return to the Netherlands in March 2019.

Hizbullo Shoalizoda (2020, Austria)



In March 2020, Hizbullo Shoalizoda was extradited from Austria to Tajikistan after a court turned down his asylum application, which the Supreme Court of Austria later ruled illegal.^{xliii} He was held incommunicado in a prison in Dushanbe upon his return and tortured to confess to being a member of the IRPT. He was convicted and sentenced to 20 years in prison in June 2020, following a secret trial. In November 2020 the Supreme Court of Austria ordered the authorities to secure his return from Tajikistan; however, he remains imprisoned in Tajikistan at the time of writing.^{xliv}

Rahmatjon Muhammadjon (2021, Russia, Group 24)

Rahmatjon Muhammadjon, a member of Group 24, vanished in Moscow under unknown circumstances on May 18, 2021. The opposition group told reporters that Muhammadjon acquired Russian citizenship in 2018. Neither his relatives nor his associates were able to locate his whereabouts. Before his disappearance Muhammadjon had received threats for his peaceful political activism.^{xlv} Muhammadjon spoke at international conferences criticizing Tajik authorities, and also participated in rallies and pickets against President Rahmon, including on June 24, 2019, near Moscow's Red Square with another disappeared Group 24 activist Shobudin Badalov during a state visit by Rahmon to Russia.

Izzat Amon (2021, Russia)



On March 25, 2021, colleagues reported that Russian authorities had detained Tajik migrant rights defender, Izzat Amon, and expelled him from the country, hiding all information about his whereabouts and the circumstances of his transfer to Tajikistan.^{xlvi} Russia's Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Tajik embassy in Moscow said on the same day that they had no information about his fate. It was later revealed that prior

to handing him to Tajik security services, Russian authorities had rescinded his Russian citizenship. He had lived in Russia for more than 20 years, running a nonprofit organization in Moscow that assisted migrants from Central Asia in finding employment, to register their residency, and receive legal advice. Amon was quickly tried and imprisoned for nine years on various fabricated charges after his forced return to Dushanbe.^{xlvii}

Abdusattor Pirmuhammadzoda (2022)



On July 8 and 9, respectively, police arrested journalist Zavqibek Saidamini and blogger Abdusattor Pirmuhammadzoda.^{xlviii} Saidamini published commentary and reporting on his YouTube channels, which have about 15,000 subscribers. His videos covered topics including border conflicts with Kyrgyzstan, religion, and allegations of unlawful military drafting practices. Pirmuhammadzoda published his personal views on free speech and alleged government injustices on his YouTube channel, where he had about 39,000 subscribers. Both Saidamini and Pirmuhammadzoda worked with

imprisoned journalists Daler Imomali and Avazmad Ghurbatov who were detained on June 15, and published calls for their release. Following his apprehension on July 9 Pirmuhammadzoda was held for at least ten days in incommunicado detention.^{xlix}

Abdullohi Shamsiddin (2023, IRPT, Germany)



On January 18, 2023, Germany deported Abdullohi Shamsiddin, the son of a member of the IRPT, to Tajikistan, where he was subject to enforced disappearance and then reportedly held in solitary confinement by the State Committee for National Security. Sources reported that he was sentenced in March 2023 to 7 years in prison on charges of making public calls for the violent overthrow of the government despite the complete absence of evidence of any wrongdoing.¹

Nizomiddin Nasriddinov (2023, Belarus)



Belarus authorities extradited Nizomiddin Nasriddinov, a Tajik political activist with refugee status in Germany, to Tajikistan, where he is at serious risk of persecution and torture.ⁱⁱ Tajik authorities had placed Nasriddinov, an activist in Group 24 on an international wanted list in 2017 for his public criticism of Tajikistan's president and government. Belarusian authorities detained him on January 8, 2023, at the request of Tajik authorities when he crossed the border from Lithuania. They refused his asylum request and, although Nasriddinov still had time to appeal the refusal, extradited him to Tajikistan on July

24, despite objections from local and international organizations. There has been no information as to his situation and whereabouts since his extradition. Nasriddinov's family is located in Germany, where they have resided since 2015.

Enforced Disappearances in the Crackdown on the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) (2022-present)

By 2021, the Tajik government had effectively cleared the entire political and social space in the country of all actual or perceived opponents, imprisoning hundreds of political activists and peaceful religious believers. Since the end of Tajikistan's civil war, President Rahmon and his extended family had consolidated successfully their political and economic power, sidelining, jailing or killing all competition, including independent leaders across all of Tajikistan's. All regions except for one: Gorno-Badakhshan—an autonomous region in the country's remote east that makes up 45% of Tajikistan's territory and is home to a distinct ethnolinguistic and religious minority of Pamiris who speak languages distinct from Tojiki and whose Ismaili faith forms a subset of Shiite Islam that separates them from the majority of Tajiks who are Sunni Muslims. While it occupies almost half of the country's territory, its population is a mere 250,000. The region's mountainous terrain makes travel difficult, while its economy suffers from unemployment, difficult living conditions, and high food prices. In 2022, Genocide Watch issued a warning that the early stages of a Pamiri genocide are being seen in GBAO, and that the situation has escalated to a preparation or even active persecution stage.^{liii}

While a discussion of the central authorities' many attempts to suppress GBAO's civil society is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to mention that armed incursions by the central authorities happened on numerous occasions, including in 2012, 2014, 2018, 2021 and, finally, 2022.

The latest crackdown on activists in GBAO followed protests initially sparked in May 2022 by anger over the lack of an investigation into the 2021 death of an activist while in police custody and the refusal by regional authorities to consider the resignation of regional Governor Alisher Mirzonabot and Khorog Mayor Rizo Nazarzoda. Rallies intensified after one of the protesters, 29-year-old Zamir Nazrishoev, was killed by police on May 16, 2022, prompting authorities to launch what they called a "counterterrorist operation." The escalating violence, which included dozens of extrajudicial killings, sparked a call for restraint from UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, Western diplomatic missions in Tajikistan, and human rights groups. Dozens of Pamiri activists have been extradited, kidnapped, or forcibly returned from abroad, mostly from Russia, to Tajikistan on political charges.

Within GBAO itself, according to civil society sources, authorities have decimated civil society by imprisoning thousands of protesters and others on lengthy prison sentences for their peaceful activism. Pamiri businesses have been systematically expropriated and NGOs liquidated. Sources report that the government constructed an entirely new facility in Tajikistan's northern Sughd region to account for the influx of Pamiri prisoners, including journalists who covered the protests, convincing many that the current crackdown is one aimed at entirely suppressing the Pamiri ethno-linguistic, religious minority group and its identity.^{liiii}

Among the numerous forced returns from abroad, mainly Russia, and the hundreds arrests of Pamiris inside Tajikistan many cases have featured enforced disappearances or incommunicado detention. The cases of imprisoned human rights defender **Manuchehr Kholiqnazarov**, journalist **Ulfathonim Mamadshoeva**, lawyer **Faromuz Irgashev** or Pamiri athlete **Chorshanbe Chorshanbiyev** and **Komron**

Mamadnazarov, along with some of the other journalists outside of GBAO arrested in 2022 **all included periods of incommunicado detention**, involving denial of contact with relatives, independent lawyers, and torture. This segment covers only a fraction of these cases by including a few representative examples:

Amriddin Alovatshoev (2022, Russia)



A Pamiri leader of GBAO youth and migrants in Russia, Amriddin Alovatshoev, who was extradited to Tajikistan in early 2023 and tried in Dushanbe on trumped-up charges of hostage taking, illegal depriving others of their freedom, and "other crimes," received an 18 year prison sentence. Alovatshoev went incommunicado on January 11 and media reports said that he was detained in the Russian city of

Belgorod at the Tajik government's request. In early February, Tajik authorities said Alovatshoev was extradited to Dushanbe. He later was shown providing a forced confession to unspecified crimes in a video released by Tajik authorities on February 12.

Faromuz Irgashev (2022, Commission 44)



In 2020, at age 30, Khorog native and lawyer Faromuz Irgashev declared his intention to contest the presidential election against authoritarian president Emomali Rahmon after becoming thoroughly disillusioned with the problem of widespread police violence and a desire to test Tajikistan's nominal democratic political system.^{liv} Irgashev came under enormous scrutiny at the hands of the Tajik security services immediately after his announcement and he was soon informed by Tajikistan's Central Election Commission that he

had been stricken from eligibility ostensibly due to submitting certain documents in time.^{lv} Two years later, following Dushanbe's crackdown on protesters in GBAO, Irgashev took on a leading role in Commission 44, a Pamiri civil society body recognized by the government in Dushanbe as a body that could help mediate tensions between GBAO residents and the central authorities. Authorities Irgashev

and other members of Commission 44 in May 2022, subjecting him to periods of incommunicado detention until the Supreme Court sentenced him to 30 years imprisonment in December on various trumped-up charges of receiving illegal financial support from abroad, organizing an unsanctioned rally, and participating in the activities of a criminal group.

Oraz Vazirbekov and Ramzi Vazirbekov (2022, Russia)



Oraz Vazirbekov and Ramzi Vazirbekov, two unrelated Pamiri men who are both Russian citizens, were reported missing at Moscow’s Domodedovo airport on July 29, 2022. They reappeared later in a televised speech in Tajikistan in which they said they had returned to Tajikistan “voluntarily” to assist the official investigation into the events leading to protests in GBAO.^{lvi} Both were held in Dushanbe in incommunicado detention

for prolonged periods. Previously, Oraz Vazirbekov had expressed fears of being kidnapped by the Tajik special services. Oraz later received a sixteen year sentence on extremism charges despite no evidence of any involvement in violence. Similarly, Ramzi received a sentence of thirteen years in prison ostensibly for making “calls for the overthrow of the constitutional order” and being a “member of a criminal group.”

Ruslan Pulodbekov (2022, Russia)

Relatives of another GBAO native Ruslan Pulodbekov told RFE/RL on August 3, 2022 that he went incommunicado after he was briefly detained by immigration police in Moscow on July 29, the same day two other GBAO natives – Oraz and Ramzi Vazirbekov, who are now Russian citizens -- went missing from a Moscow airport before emerging later in a video on a YouTube channel saying that they had “decided to return to Tajikistan” on their “own will.”^{lvii} Pulodbekov’s relatives told RFE/RL that he was most likely taken into Tajik custody over his close ties with Amriddin Alovatshoev, who was sentenced to 18 years in prison in Dushanbe in April 2022, four months after he was arrested in Russia and later showed up in custody in Tajikistan.

Key recommendations

To the Government of Tajikistan:

- Immediately sign and ratify the International Convention on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED);
- Introduce an autonomous crime of enforced disappearance in the penal code;
- Establish a simple, accessible, centralized nation-wide system of registration of all persons deprived of liberty as provided for in the Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance for families to quickly locate their loved ones;
- Immediately and unconditionally release all the political prisoners profiled in this report, including imprisoned human rights defenders, political activists, lawyers, journalists, and others who have been subjected to enforced disappearances, incommunicado detention, torture, ill-treatment, and other violations of human rights;

To Tajikistan's international partners, including the OSCE, US, EU, and other actors:

- Publicly and privately call on Dushanbe to accede to the ICPPED and adopt an autonomous crime of enforced disappearance in the penal code;
- Raise the imprisonment of human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, and peaceful political activists at every possible opportunity, attaching meaningful policy consequences to Dushanbe's continuing human rights crackdown both with regard to civil society and the media sphere and in particular in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO)
- Use "Magnitsky"-style targeted sanctions against the perpetrators in the Tajik government responsible for the policy and practice of enforced disappearances and incommunicado detention, in particular, among President Rahmon's presidential administration and within the country's security services.

Endnotes

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On February 5, Turkish police detained Sharipov on the street outside the tea house and took him to Istanbul’s Kumkapi removal center. At the removal center, Turkish migration authorities informed Sharipov that Tajikistan was seeking his arrest on terrorism charges but that he was not facing imminent deportation to Tajikistan. Turkish officials at the detention center encouraged Sharipov to consider voluntarily leaving Turkey for a safe third country rather than face lengthy detention while he contested Tajikistan’s request for extradition. Over the next 11 days, Sharipov’s relatives and lawyer visited him at Kumkapi removal center several times. Sharipov’s lawyer told Human Rights Watch that they were repeatedly assured that Sharipov was not at imminent risk of being removed to Tajikistan. However, they were not informed as to whether a formal extradition request had been made, and if they could therefore begin proceedings to challenge it.

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