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Citation

Cordier, B. de. (2007). Shiite Aid Organizations in Tajikistan. *Isim Review*, 19(1), 10-11.
Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17127>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Shiite Aid Organizations in Tajikistan

BRUNO DE CORDIER

Rasht is a relatively remote part of Tajikistan, with a physical geography dominated by the Western Pamirs. The area consists of several districts with a joint territory of 18,000 square kilometres and an official population of 360,000, most of whom are Hanafi Sunni Muslims. During the Tajik civil war (1992–1997), much of the Rasht region was controlled by commanders affiliated to the United Tajik Opposition (UTO). It was cut off from the rest of the country until mid-2001 because

of irregular militia activity along the roads that link it to the capital. The economy, based on agriculture and fruit farming, has received a major boost over the last few years by the reopening of transport links and the remittances from seasonal labour migrants, primarily to Russia.

The ties with Russia that already existed in the Soviet era further intensified due to the economic crisis in Tajikistan and labour shortages in some parts of Russia since 1999. According to State Migration Agency statistics, the Rasht area had some twenty-five thousand registered emigrants during the first quarter of 2006—the actual number is likely to be much higher. As the functioning local markets and the range of goods for sale show, the influx of money generated abroad creates new purchasing power, stimulating the appearance of banks, money transfer services, and mobile phone coverage in district centres where there were no basic financial services and communications until two or three years ago.

From community mobilization ...

Between 1992 and 2001, much of Rasht's population survived on humanitarian aid provided by various UN, Western, and Muslim aid organizations. Those still active today have gradually switched to long-term development and community mobilization programmes. One example is the Aga Khan Development Network and its Mountain Societies Development Support Programme (MSDSP). The MSDSP started in 1993 in Kuhistan-i-Badakhshan, a province in Tajikistan with a substantial percentage of Ismaili Shiites.¹ The MSDSP served as a framework to switch from relief activities to agricultural and infrastructure development. By providing training, technical assets, and grants and micro-credits, it aimed to assist individual farmers to cope with the collapse of the Soviet state farms, the privatization of land, and to promote self-reliance and diversification.

As the MSDSP expanded and its focus on individual citizens showed to be of limited success, community mobilization became increasingly important. Since 1998, the main mobilization channels are the so-called Village Organizations (VO), a concept used by the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme in Pakistan's Northern Areas and Chitral district since 1982. The VO group representatives of each of the village's households receive training and ad hoc technical support from MSDSP. Each VO has a number of working groups on specific issues such as finance and accounting, animal husbandry, or irrigation.

The VO's task is to identify needs and mobilize resources for local initiatives that are to contribute to raising living standards in the village or neighbourhood. Until 2004, the VO also served as a conduit for micro-credits yet this service is now provided by the AKDN-affiliated First Micro-Finance Bank. To promote social cohesion and self-reliance,

In the global periphery and (post-)conflict areas, faith-based aid organizations play an important role as providers of social services. The activities of the Aga Khan Development Network and the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation in the former Soviet republic of Tajikistan reflect different backgrounds and approaches used by Muslim aid organizations. They also outline how these organizations obtained a foothold and gained legitimacy in environments that do not share their confessional background.

the VO approach tries to instrumentalize existing kinship ties and informal authorities, for example village elders, clan heads, village mullahs, professionals, and key figures in the local formal and informal economy.

According to MSDSP project statistics, as of late 2006 the VO programme in the Rasht valley area operates in 389 villages with over 47,000 beneficiaries in total. About 180 projects have been realized or approved, eighty per cent of which involved the upgrading of irrigation

channels, roads, and bridges. Two trends can be observed more recently. First, some of the older Village Organizations identified other partners besides MSDSP in order to diversify their sponsorship base. Second, besides infrastructure there seems to be an increasing trend to invest in income generation projects for vulnerable groups, like the construction of a safflower mill, the distribution of chickens to poor, female-headed households, or the layout of an orchard.

... to charity work

The Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation (IKRF) represents an entirely different approach. The IKRF started to work in Tajikistan during the war in mid-1995. Though officially a foundation and not a state institution, the IKRF is one of the main channels for social welfare in Iran as well as the Iranian government's main conduit for international humanitarian aid. It has five field offices in Tajikistan and plans for two more. According to its statistics, the IKRF assists 6,000 needy households in the country, totalling some 35,000 beneficiaries. The foundation's key target group are widows and orphans—a focal group in Islamic charity—and poor female-headed households. The latter are indeed a relatively substantial group in Rasht and other parts of Tajikistan due to the civil war and, more recently, labour migration.

The IKRF's field office in Garm is one of three in the Rasht valley and covers the districts of Garm, Tajikabad, and Jirgital. It has four employees and has a much more discrete profile than the MSDSP with which, as far as we know, it has no operational contacts. Its activities in the area reflect the IKRF programme in Tajikistan and have no community mobilization or training approach. Initially, it provided humanitarian assistance to one hundred families of war widows, gradually expanding

to the present five hundred. The beneficiaries receive bi-monthly food and household packages, usually until a son reaches majority age. Part of the food and household products which are distributed by the IKRF is purchased from local markets, part is imported from Iran. The IKRF Garm branch provides similar assistance to some sixty pensioners as well as a number of stipends to children from poor households who attend school in Garm.

Another IKRF activity is the repair of houses of widows and poor families. At the time of research, this was planned for 30 dwellings in the Garm branch area. One of the IKRF's more peculiar activities is the provision of marriage trousseaus and household sets to girls from needy families who plan to marry. According to its data, the IKRF assisted 250 newlyweds in Tajikistan this way and planned to assist another 750 in late 2006 and 2007. The IKRF also organizes activities like *iftar* (fast breaking) meals during Ramadan and offers help to widows and pensioners with administrative formalities. To ensure that the funds reach

[H]umanitarian needs ... resulted in a certain indifference towards the origin or "denomination" of aid ...

targeted groups, the foundation's local staff study the social and financial situation of applicants.

Beyond sectarianism

That both the Aga Khan Development Network and the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation are called "Shiite organizations" means that they have been founded by, and are linked to, a Shiite establishment. In the case of the AKDN, this establishment is the Ismaili Imamate and, as such, the wider Ismaili Shiite community which has the peculiarity of being a non-territorial diaspora. For the IKRF, in contrast, it is Iran's official-clerical establishment and as such, a state and its interests. This does not mean that the bulk of their staff and beneficiaries are Shiite or that they have an agenda of spreading the Ismaili or Imami (Twelver) brands of Shiite Islam among non-Shiite populations. There are actually no indicators or anecdotal evidence that either one of the organizations is involved in such activities in Rasht. In terms of staffing, the vast majority of both organization's staff and cadres are from the Rasht area and, as such, of Sunni background.

As far as the Rasht goes, the AKDN-MSDSP and the IKRF clearly have different beneficiary niches. On the whole, their impact in terms of direct employment and income generation is limited as compared to the importance of labour migration and remittances thereof. Nonetheless, they are important in the public field, given the gap left by the collapse of the Soviet welfare state and the technical-financial incapability of the present state to take over its role, especially in more remote areas. Programmes like MSDSP's community mobilization are also instrumental in breaking off the culture of dependence and help cope with stark social changes ranging from the demise of the Soviet state farm system to the increase in female-headed households due to civil war and migration. More "classical" charity like that offered by the IKRF has a certain niche and added value among extremely marginalized parts of society and focuses more on short-term needs. Yet, both beneficiary groups overlap since part of the IKRF's beneficiaries are members of MSDSP-supported Village Organizations.

The Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, being linked to and funded by Iranian government-affiliated actors (even though it is registered as a non-governmental organization) pretty much operates on its own, is not integrated in the wider development community, and fits into a wider interest consolidation movement by the Iranian government in Tajikistan. This also includes the import of Iranian goods and the co-funding and implementation of a number of transport and hydroelectric projects. As the IKRF cadres interviewed stressed, the IKRF considers itself pan-Islamic and non-sectarian and illustrated this by pointing to activities among other needy non-Shiite Muslims, like in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

By contrast, the Aga Khan Development Network and MSDSP co-operate with a number of international donors like the Canadian International Development Agency and the UK's Department for International Development. Their expansion into non-Shiite areas (and non-Ismaili in particular) like Rasht also reflects a rationale. The AKDN is generally a vehicle for social advancement and economic power for the Ismaili minority in Tajikistan as it is in other countries where it operates. A project coordinator working on conflict prevention found that Ismailis form a large part of the staff of AKDN and MSDSP as compared to their overall share in the population, which is normal since they are related to the Ismaili leadership and were active in Ismaili areas first. Their expansion into non-Ismaili areas over a number of years is strategically motivated: first, all Ismaili areas in the country are already covered and have little room for expansion; second, if the AKDN would be perceived to privilege only one community it might cause sectarian tensions where there are none; and third, being non-exclusive is also important to its international donors.

Legitimacy in a non-Shiite context

The AKDN-MSDSP and the IKRF are the only Muslim aid organizations that have operated in the Rasht valley since the civil war. The fact that they are of Shiite rather than Sunni background like the near-totality of the population raises the question of how their presence is perceived and how they gained legitimacy with both the authorities and the population for long-term activities. When both the MSDSP and the IKRF started to work in Rasht in the late nineties, this was still a conflict area largely under UTO control. Major obstacles were the numerous checkpoints set up by governmental and opposition militias and the suspi-

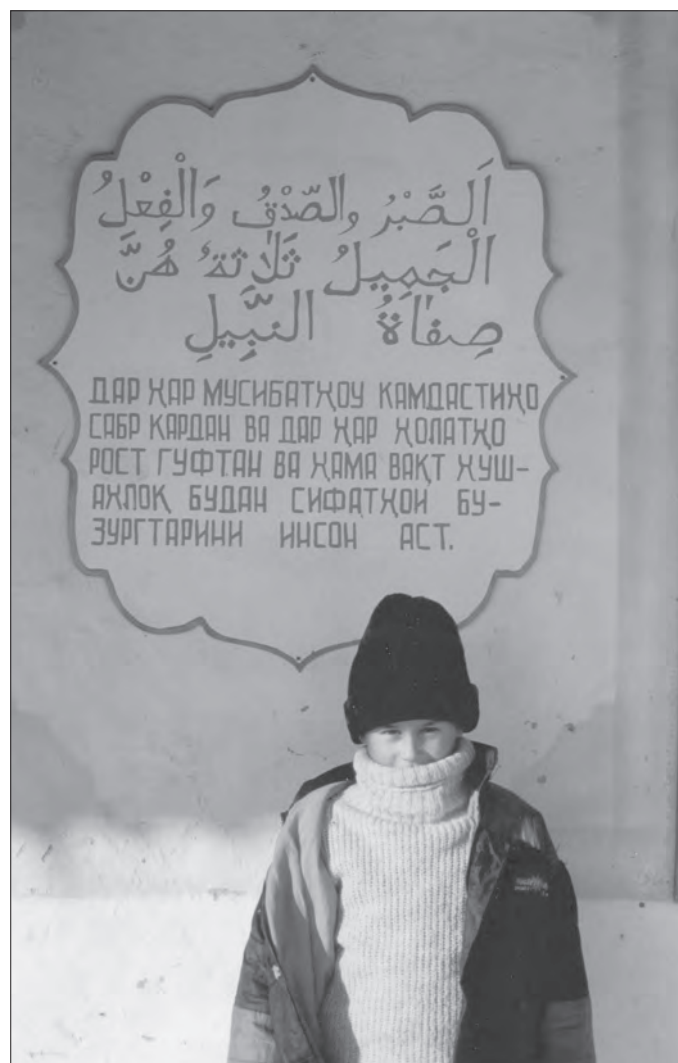


PHOTO BY BRUNO DE CORDIER, 2001

Boy near village mosque in Andarak, Tajikistan

cions and arbitrariness of individual commanders. Much of the access and legitimacy building in UTO territory went through ad hoc arrangements with commanders, often on the basis of personal networks. One example mentioned during the research is that of an UTO commander from Tajikabad who was sympathetic to the "Ismaili" MSDSP because of his spouse's Ismaili origins.

The post-conflict Tajikistan's secular regime, for its part, seems more comfortable with Shiite aid organizations for these are unlikely to propagate militant forms of Sunni Islam—adhered to by part of the UTO at the time—among Rasht's predominantly Sunni population. What about the grassroots level? Two factors seem to determine the perception of Shiite aid organizations in Rasht: first, the acute humanitarian needs, caused by the collapse of the Soviet economy, political instability, and economic blockade, which resulted in a certain indifference towards the origin or "denomination" of aid (an attitude needing to be understood in light of the striking absence at the time of Sunni humanitarian actors, in particular, of those from the Gulf); second, due to the suppression of religious practice and clerics among Sunnis, Shiites, as well as Ismailis in the Soviet Union, there is no strong sectarian consciousness among the population. So despite the ambivalent attitudes towards religion, aid, and development in former Soviet environments and the non-Shiite background of their beneficiaries, the described organizations have gained legitimacy by partly filling the void left by a dysfunctional state and by appealing to a non-sectarian Muslim philanthropic discourse.

Notes

1. Ismaili Shiites form 2.8 percent of Tajikistan's population of some 7 million. Most live in the province of Kuhistan-i-Badakhshan and in the capital of Dushanbe.

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