Tajik Taliban Members Prepare to Carry Jihad Home

Recently, more and more often in various media reports one can find information about the increased terrorist threat to Tajikistan coming from Afghanistan.

To objectively understand the emerging situation, it is necessary to recall that Afghanistan and Tajikistan have quite close relations, due to a largely common historical past, traditions, culture and religion, as well as a common language. The length of the shared border is 1,344 km.

The formation of the Republic of Tajikistan (late 1991) actually coincided with the coming to power in Afghanistan of the Mujahideen regime (early 1992), with Tajikistan being one of the first countries to recognize the mujahideen regime, which was also led by ethnic Tajiks.

In recent decades, the countries have tried to develop relations in various directions, among which the largest growth area for joint Afghan-Tajik projects has been hydroelectricity: the very high power generation potential of the two border rivers - the Panj and Amu Darya (on the Afghan-Tajik border section) together is about 160 billion kWh. The construction of bridges over the Panj River is also of great importance: since Soviet times, apart from the famous “Friendship Bridge”, three more bridges have been built. The development of joint gas facilities and the construction of gas pipelines is also seen as promising, but due to a lack of funds, the projects have not yet begun to be implemented. Seeking to use Afghan territory as a corridor to Pakistani ports, Tajikistan is trying to break its transport isolation. Recently, cultural and educational relations between the two countries have been actively developing: Tajikistan regularly sends cultural delegations and musical groups on tour to Afghanistan. Tajikistan’s universities and colleges have a large number of students from the neighboring country, mostly in the medical,
engineering, and agricultural faculties. Afghan scientists often come to the Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan for internships.

In October 2001, when Operation Enduring Freedom began, Tajikistan became a transit zone for the International Security Assistance Force into Afghanistan and also regularly sent humanitarian aid to residents of the neighboring country.

Today, the intensification of relations between the two countries largely depends on the socio-political and military situation in Afghanistan; drug smuggling and security problems have become a serious challenge to relations between the two countries. The so-called “Tajik opposition in Afghanistan” has repeatedly been a violator of all possible agreements.

“The Taliban” (a movement banned in the Russian Federation) have always been interested in the post-Soviet space. Back in the 1990s, the Taliban did not conceal their plans to invade Central Asia; some of their leaders promised that after taking full control of Afghanistan, they would then march forward to Bukhara and Samarkand. In the mid-1990s, Taliban fighters fought in Chechnya on the side of the separatists against Russian troops, and showed incredible cruelty to prisoners. After the collapse of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, militant leaders changed their rhetoric and began publicly emphasizing their rejection of jihadist expansion beyond Afghanistan’s borders. Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Deputy Leader of the Taliban movement, in an online conference organized by the Qatar Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies on December 10, 2020, once again stated that the Taliban are interested in “good relations with their neighbors” and “the Taliban have no intention to interfere in other countries’ affairs.”

However, no one can confirm the Taliban’s sincerity on this issue today, especially since foreign Taliban fighters from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and the Russian North Caucasus have long concentrated their forces in the Jirm and Warduj districts of northern Afghanistan’s Badakhshan province, turning it into an entry point for terrorist operations in Tajikistan and other Central Asian republics. According to information published in the Afghan media, this contingent from the former Soviet republics currently numbers at least 500 fighters who are trying to penetrate the Badakhshan districts of Maimai and Nusai to take control of a large segment of the Afghan-Tajik border.

The confirmation of the Tajik Taliban’s plans to move the jihad from Afghanistan to their homeland and begin fighting in Tajikistan was a video message they recently prepared and distributed on social media, titled “Conquest of Maimai district”. It became a kind of jihadist video report of the November 19 destruction of an Afghan police post in the Maimai district (Upper Darwaz) of northern Afghanistan’s Badakhshan province, as well as a message to security forces and authorities in neighboring Tajikistan. Citizens of Tajikistan took an active part in this action in Maimai and did not even bother to conceal their faces. The Taliban confirmed on November 21 that their fighters attacked six police outposts in Badakhshan’s Jirm district on November 19, killing and wounding more than 40 Afghan security personnel. Immediately after this massacre of Afghan policemen in the Maimai area, the commander of the Tajik Taliban, standing on the bank of the Panj and addressing the security forces and the Tajik authorities, publicly stated his intention to cross the border river soon and commit similar massacres on Tajik territory.

The deputy governor of Badakhshan province, Akhtar Muhammad Khairzada, also confirmed the Taliban terrorist attack in November and told the Afghan service of Radio Ozodi on December 16 that almost 450 foreign terrorists from various countries of the world were in this mountainous region. They moved from Jurm and Warduj districts to Moymay, Nusay and Registon districts bordering Tajikistan and are now operating there. Although local Afghan authorities confirm that foreign fighters are fighting alongside Taliban units, Zabihullah Mujahid, a Taliban spokesman, is trying to deny this information by saying that “the Taliban do not need the help of foreign combatants”.

The terrorists who are now along the Afghan-Tajik border are undoubtedly a great concern for Afghanistan and Tajikistan, which makes it objectively necessary to stop these terrorists in every possible way, otherwise they will create problems for all countries in the region. Tajik President Emomali Rahmon, in his speech at the summit of CIS countries on December 18, paid special attention to the terrorist threat from Afghanistan, emphasizing that today the drastic deterioration of the situation in the northern and eastern provinces of Afghanistan is indeed a matter of concern. In this regard, the president of Tajikistan noted that Tajikistan plays the role of a buffer on the path of expansion and threats emanating from Afghanistan, so the need to strengthen the borders with this country today is especially relevant not only for Tajikistan, but also for the CIS countries.

*Vladimir Danilov, political observer, exclusively for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook".*