

Pursuing Accountability for Crimes against Humanity in Tajikistan: International Criminal Court and Germany's National Courts¹

STEVE SWERDLOW¹, ANDRE FERREIRA², THOMAS CALLAHAN¹

¹ *University of Southern California, USA*

² *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium*

Abstract. Examining the human rights crisis currently unfolding in Tajikistan and highlighting the crimes against humanity committed against the Pamiri minority in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) between 2021 and the present by President Emomali Rahmon and senior officials, this article offers victims a roadmap for seeking accountability at the International Criminal Court (ICC) and Germany's national courts using universal jurisdiction. The article argues that Dushanbe's abuses directed against Pamiris, which include extrajudicial killings, imprisonment, torture, enforced disappearances, and other violations meets the definition of a crime against humanity under the Rome Statute. Reviewing precedent in both venues, such as Germany's recent prosecutions of Syrian government perpetrators of torture, the article outlines practical steps for activists and victims seeking justice. The authors argue that recent human rights victories in Germany and important ICC reforms centring victims demonstrate the potential for prosecuting perpetrators of egregious rights abuses in Tajikistan. These promising avenues for holding Tajik officials accountable require strategic litigation, witness protection, and sustained advocacy efforts.

¹ This paper was written by Steve Swerdlow, esq., a human rights lawyer and Associate Professor of the Practice of Human Rights in the Department of Political and International Relations at the University of Southern California, with Andre Ferreira, a graduate of Harvard University who is currently pursuing his Master's in International Politics from KU Leuven in Belgium, with invaluable research assistance provided by USC graduate students Sariah Pereira and Teresa Ramirez and USC undergraduate students Thomas Callahan and Sara Stienecker.

Keywords: crimes against humanity, international criminal court, Pamiris, Tajikistan, universal jurisdiction.

Introduction

“We want justice and the truth about why our children’s blood was spilt”, agonised Pevistamo Abdulmuminova in a *Guardian* interview, struggling to comprehend the death of her twenty-nine-year-old son, Gulbiddin Ziyobekov. His murder by Tajikistan’s security services on November 25, 2021 in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO)—a region in the remote Pamir mountains of eastern Tajikistan home to ethno-linguistic, religious groups—would spark a crackdown on an entire ethnic group more brutal and consequential than any of the crackdowns that had come before (Tondo 2022).² Together, the peoples of GBAO form the Pamiri ethnic minority, whose distinct identity, language, and culture Tajikistan’s authoritarian government has systematically repressed. Authorities would claim unconvincingly that Ziyobekov was shot while resisting arrest during a criminal investigation. But eyewitness and mobile phone footage demonstrated the opposite: an extrajudicial killing that led to widespread demonstrations across GBAO that prompted government forces to fire on dozens of unarmed protesters, at first killing two and injuring seventeen. The pattern of extrajudicial killings escalated in May and June 2022, when government forces on the orders of authoritarian President Emomali Rahmon and top officials, shot and killed dozens more peaceful Pamiri protesters and unleashed a campaign of arrests, imprisonment and torture.

Amchigul Amirshoeva, another Pamiri resident, described her despair at the authorities’ increasing intimidation of the local population: “There is no justice here. People no longer trust the authorities [and] have lost faith in the institutions” (Tondo 2022). Following the killings, authorities imprisoned hundreds of Pamiri civil society, cultural, political and reli-

² GBAO is an autonomous region that makes up 45% of Tajikistan’s territory in the east. Unlike other areas of Tajikistan, GBAO is home to a distinct ethnolinguistic and religious minority, the Pamiri people, who speak languages distinct from Tojiki and whose Ismaili faith forms a subset of Shiite Islam – separating them from most Tajiks, who are Sunnis. While it occupies almost half of the country’s territory, its population is a mere 250,000 – a fraction of the 10 million inhabiting the rest of the nation. The region’s mountainous terrain makes travel difficult, while its economy suffers from unemployment, difficult living conditions, and high food prices. 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.

gious leaders, forcibly kidnapped or extradited dozens of Pamiris from Russia, suppressed broadcasts in Pamiri language, and shuttered over 500 NGOs, businesses, and religious institutions, including those of the Pamiri's spiritual leader abroad, the Aga Khan (Human Rights Watch, 2024). The GBAO crackdown was so severe that by June 2022, the NGO Genocide Watch said that Tajikistan was witnessing the early stages of a Pamiri genocide, "preparation" and "active persecution" on the way to a full-blown genocide (Hill 2022). As of 2025, the repression against ethnic Pamiris continues unabated, with five Pamiri prisoners detained after the events of 2022 dying within months of each other in custody, in some cases after being denied medical care. Human rights groups and Pamiri journalistic outlets abroad called on Tajikistan's authorities to immediately and transparently investigate the deaths and provide clear explanations to their families. (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

The campaign against Pamiris prosecuted by President Rahmon, who has ruled the country with increasing repression since 1992, is but one aspect of an abysmal rights situation that has worsened starkly over the course of more than a decade. Early 2024 witnessed two opposition activists, Nasimjon Sharifov and Suhrob Zafar, suspiciously vanish off the streets of Istanbul, Turkey, where they had lived for years following the government's designation of their Group 24 political movement as "extremist" (Swerdlow 2024). Months later they reappeared in handcuffs on the tarmac of Dushanbe's airport before being sentenced on bogus terrorism charges to 20 and 30-year sentences, respectively (Swerdlow 2023). The transnational kidnapping added the two men to a rapidly growing list of hundreds of Tajikistan's political prisoners, including journalists, political activists, rights defenders, and others, who systematically experience torture (Swerdlow 2023).

Despite the highlighting of Tajikistan's atrocious rights record by human rights groups, United Nations bodies, the State Department, and multiple European Parliament resolutions³ over the past several years, the government's abuses have continued with impunity, leaving victims and relatives of those killed, disappeared, or tortured with no recourse.

Arguing that the Tajik government's abuses during the crackdown in GBAO constitute crimes against humanity under international criminal law, this article endeavours to put an end to President Rahmon and his officials' long-standing lack of accountability and offers a roadmap to obtain justice in international courts. Specifically, this article advances two options for pursuing justice: first, at the International Criminal Court

³ European Parliament resolution of 7 July 2022 on the situation in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province (2022/2753(RSP)), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0293_EN.html.

(ICC), which Tajikistan acceded to upon signing and ratifying the Rome Statute in 1998 and 2000, respectively; and second, in Germany's national courts, where a substantial Tajik diaspora and population of victims live, using the concept of universal jurisdiction.

The authors first seek to prove that the Tajik government's actions in GBAO (2021-present) meet the threshold of a crime against humanity before discussing jurisdictional options. Germany's use of universal jurisdiction in landmark trials in recent years to prosecute crimes against humanity for torture in Syria, as well as slavery and genocide by ISIS against the Yazidi minority, in addition to investigations concerning Ukraine, Belarus, and elsewhere, has made it a hub for the robust prosecution of atrocity crimes. This article examines relevant precedent used to investigate or prosecute perpetrators in analogous cases, outlines practical steps potential plaintiffs should consider in either venue, and explores potential challenges. Finally, the article argues that the ICC and Germany's national courts could make a powerful contribution to global justice by issuing arrest warrants, offering witness protection, and seeking the extradition of Tajik officials responsible for crimes against humanity.

Factual Background

While Tajikistan remained poor and its infrastructure devastated at the end of its civil war in 1997, the country's vibrant NGO sector, creative journalists, and an active opposition helped Tajikistan's society remain decidedly more open than its neighbouring Uzbekistan, which had become a hardcore authoritarian regime.⁴ But this changed as President Rahmon amassed personal power, introducing his children into positions of authority and giving them key levers of control over the country's fledgling economy. As Rahmon grew paranoid of losing his grip on pow-

⁴ This article has greatly benefited from the work of other scholars who explain how Tajikistan's emergence from the bloody civil war of 1992-1997 and the ethnic/regional divisions that defined it, in some ways, set the stage for the present crimes against humanity committed against Pamiris. Nourzhanov and Bleuer, for example, explore how after the war Rahmon erected a nationalist ideology by promoting an "ethno-centric approach to national consolidation since 1997, focusing on the historical exceptionalism of the Tajiks, their moderate Muslim sensibilities, and the 'othering' of Turkic neighbours" (Nourzhanov & Bleuer 2013). Driscoll also notes that Rahmon appointed warlords to key government positions during the peace-building process. For example, he appointed Yakub Salimov, the head of the Dushanbe mafia as the Minister of the Interior, and Ghaffor Mirzoyeva, a twice-convicted rapist, as the Deputy Minister of the Interior. Driscoll's account emphasises "the ability of domestic actors in a civil war zone to anticipate and frustrate the desires of foreign development professionals to make politics open and transparent", creating a government rife with corruption (Driscoll 2015).

er, Tajikistan's human rights record took a precipitous turn for the worse between 2012-2015 (Swerdlow 2023).

Dushanbe intensified its pressure on all manifestations of perceived criticism, in particular, on opposition activists in and outside the country, including in GBAO where it launched a limited but lethal incursion in 2012. In this period, authorities used enforced disappearances, incommunicado detention, and transnational repression in a systematic and widespread fashion. The main targets were members of Group 24, an opposition movement based outside Tajikistan led by businessman Umarali Kuvvatov and the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). Kuvvatov was assassinated in Istanbul in March 2015 in circumstances organised by Tajikistan's security services. The ensuing years would be defined by an aggressive campaign of politically motivated imprisonment and extend to Tajik opposition figures living in Russia, Turkey, Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan.⁵

By 2021, after the imprisonment of hundreds of political prisoners, the Tajik government had effectively cleared the political space of all actual or perceived opponents and consolidated power across all regions with one major exception: GBAO. As mentioned above, the government's May 2022 crackdown began in response to peaceful protests by Pamiris over the death in November 2021 in police custody of Gulbiddin Ziyobekov and the lack of any meaningful investigation. They were also inspired by the refusal of authorities to consider the resignation of regional Governor Alisher Mirzonabot and Khorog Mayor Rizo Nazarzoda. Rallies intensified after police killed one of the protesters, 29-year-old Zamir Nazrishoev, on May 16, 2022, prompting the launch of what authorities called a "counterterrorist operation". The violence included at least twenty-five but likely many more extrajudicial killings and even sparked a call for restraint from UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in addition to Western diplomatic missions in Tajikistan, and human rights groups (HRW 2023; State Department 2023). But the violence metastasised, leading to the extraditions or forced kidnappings of dozens of Pamiri activists abroad, such as

⁵ 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, including ordinary citizens who have criticised the government or President Rahmon via social media. Tajikistan's security services, operating alongside local authorities abroad, have targeted activists and perceived critics inside Russia. Within the country, authorities banned the IRPT, jailing its entire leadership, and hundreds of its up to 43,000 members (Swerdlow 2016). Lemon and Thibault also detail other methods the government uses to control the population, including a policy of "assertive secularism" that has involved beard-shaving campaigns of up to 13,000 young men in a single year (Lemon & Thibault 2018).

Oraz and Ramzi Vazirbekov, two Moscow-based activists, who were forcibly returned in July 2022 after organising peaceful protests in Moscow.⁶

Tajikistan Subject to the International Criminal Court's Jurisdiction

The International Criminal Court (ICC) is a critically important venue for vindicating the rights of those targeted as part of Tajikistan's long-running human rights crisis, including for extrajudicial killings, systematic torture, enforced disappearances and other atrocity crimes. Tajikistan signed and ratified the Rome Statute in 1998 and 2000, respectively, making it subject to the ICC's jurisdiction (ICC 2003).

Just a year following the close of Tajikistan's bloody civil war (1992-1997), responding to the atrocities that had defined the twentieth century, a conference of 160 states adopted the treaty known as the Rome Statute on July 17, 1998,⁷ which established the ICC – a permanent court whose mandate is to investigate, prosecute, and try individuals accused of the most heinous atrocity crimes: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression.⁸ The Rome Statute emphasises the fundamental principle of complementarity, ensuring that the ICC can intervene when states are “unable or unwilling genuinely to carry out the investigation and prosecute the perpetrators”, which reflects the case here.⁹

Tajikistan is the first country in Central Asia to have formally aligned with the ICC's framework, but its implementation of the Statute's provisions into domestic law is far from complete (Birkett 2019, 355). While

⁶ According to civil society sources, within GBAO itself, authorities have decimated civilian populations by imprisoning thousands of protesters and sympathisers 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 aimed at entirely suppressing the Pamiri identity (Collet 2022). Among the numerous forced returns from abroad, mainly Russia, and the hundreds of Pamiris arrested 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 other journalists outside of GBAO arrested in 2022, all included periods of incommunicado detention, involving denial of contact with relatives, independent lawyers, and torture (OMCT 2022).

⁷ Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998, July 17). United Nations - Office of Legal Affairs, https://legal.un.org/icc/statute/99_corr/cstatute.htm; see also IHL (n.d.). <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/icc-statute-1998>.

⁸ Id.

⁹ Rome statute (n.d.-a). <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/2024-05/Rome-Statute-eng.pdf>.

Tajikistan's criminal code includes the crimes of genocide and war crimes, it has yet to incorporate provisions regarding crimes against humanity, the crime at issue here (ICC Project 2024).

The ICC can initiate an investigation in one of three ways: by the ICC Prosecutor, by referral of the UN Security Council, or by referral of a signatory to the Rome Statute. Chapter 3, Section I, Rules 44 and 45 of the Rules of Procedure and Evidence of the ICC state that the Prosecutor is empowered to personally investigate potential crimes, and that state parties may refer themselves or others to an investigation by the court (ICC 2013). Pursuant to Article 15 of the Rome Statute, any individual, group, or organisation can send information on alleged or potential ICC crimes to the Office of the Prosecutor (OTP) of the ICC. Before an OTP investigation can open, the ICC prosecutor must determine whether a situation meets the legal criteria laid out by the Rome Statute. The OTP analyses all situations brought to its attention based on statutory criteria and available information.¹⁰

At the time of writing this article, the authors became aware that Tajik civil society activists at home and abroad were involved in collecting evidence and submitting an official communication with the Office of the ICC Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court relating to crimes committed by the Tajik government over a period of 2002 to 2024, in particular the authorities' "coordinated state policy to eradicate political opposition, in particular against members, sympathisers and associates of the IRPT" and which included murders and extrajudicial executions; enslavement in penal institutions; torture, sexual violence, forced deportations; disappearances, persecution for political or religious reasons; and arbitrary detentions without a fair trial (Freedom for Eurasia 2025). The filing of the official complaint in April 2025 on related but distinct human rights abuses from the Pamiri case was a landmark achievement, further evidence of the importance Tajikistan's embattled civil society has placed on the ICC as a venue for prosecuting crimes against humanity committed in GBAO and beyond.

Crimes against Humanity in the GBAO Crackdown

As provided in Article 7 of the 1998 Rome Statute, a "crime against humanity means any of the following acts when committed as part of a

¹⁰ In addition to the OTP opening an investigation, another potential path would be for a third State party, such as Lithuania, Germany or another state potentially where Tajik activists reside, to refer the case to the ICC, as Tajikistan is unlikely to ever self-refer its own officials for prosecution.

widespread or systematic attack directed against civilian population, with knowledge of the attack”.¹¹

While space limits fully elucidating all the evidence required for an Article 15 Communication, this article contends that many of the government’s actions taken during the GBAO crackdown (November 2021 through the present) amount to crimes against humanity. This specifically includes acts of murder, imprisonment, torture, persecution, enforced disappearance, and other inhumane acts that have been committed as part of a widespread and systematic attack directed against a civilian population, namely Pamiris and other citizens of Tajikistan, who peacefully exercise their rights to expression, assembly, association, religion and others.

Contextual elements of the crime

Examining the contextual elements (*chapeau* elements) necessary for findings of crimes against humanity in light of international jurisprudence, an attack is a prerequisite. For such an attack to occur, an armed conflict is not necessary.¹² The term attack is defined as “a course of conduct involving the commission of acts of violence” and encompasses circumstances where there is mistreatment of the civilian population.¹³ An attack must entail at least one of the prohibited underlying acts.¹⁴ As detailed above, many of the serious human rights violations and violence found in the GBAO crackdown constitute underlying acts of a crime against humanity.

¹¹ Rome Statute, art. 7(1)

¹² See e.g. ICTY, IT-04-74-T, *Prosecutor v. Jadranko Prlić*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 29 May 2013, para. 35. The Rome Statute and the Elements of Crimes of the International Criminal Court do not require the existence of an armed conflict. On the Rome Statute reflecting the latest consensus among the international community and thus being an expression of international customary law, see UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect. See also ICC, ICC-01/04-01/07, *Prosecutor v. Germain Katanga*, Judgement pursuant to article 74 of the Statute, Trial Chamber, 7 March 2014, para. 1100.

¹³ See e.g. ICTY, IT-04-74-T, *Prosecutor v. Jadranko Prlić*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 29 May 2013, para. 35; ICTY, IT-03-69-T, *Prosecutor v. Jovica Stanišić and Franko Simatović*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 30 May 2013, para. 962; ICTY, IT-95-5/18-T, *Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić*, Public Redacted Version of Judgement Issued on 24 March 2016 – Volume I of IV (TC), 24 March 2016, para. 473; ICTR, ICTR-00-56-T, *Prosecutor v. Ndindiliyimana et al.*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 17 May 2011, para. 2087.

¹⁴ ICTR, ICTR-96-4-T, *Prosecutor v. Jean-Paul Akayesu*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 2 September 1998, para. 581; ICTR, ICTR-97-20-T, *Prosecutor v. Laurent Semanza*, Judgment and Sentence, Trial Chamber, 15 May 2003, para. 327. As such it means that the mistreatment has to reach the threshold of one of the underlying acts of crimes against humanity. See ICC, ICC-01/05-01/08, *Prosecutor v. Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo*, Judgment pursuant to Article 74 of the Statute, Trial Chamber, 21 March 2016, para. 151.

Turning now to the element of a civilian population, the term comprises “all persons who are civilians as opposed to members of the armed forces and other legitimate combatants”.¹⁵ A population is considered as ‘civilian’ if predominantly civilian in nature.¹⁶ The term population “does not mean that the entire population of the geographical entity in which the attack is taking place (a state, a municipality or another circumscribed area) must be subject to the attack”.¹⁷ The population element “is intended to imply crimes of collective nature and thus exclude single or isolated acts which [...] do not rise to the level of crimes against humanity”.¹⁸ Based on the civilian nature of the victims, the collective nature of the crimes, and the high number of victims targeted, it is clear that the attack that occurred in the GBAO crackdown was directed against a civilian population.

The attack was “widespread”, based on the high number of victims,¹⁹ the wide range of locations (Khorog, and the Rushan District) in which

¹⁵ ICTY, IT-96-23-T and IT-96-23/1-T, *Prosecutor v. Kunarac, Kovac and Vukovic*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 22 February 2001, para. 425.

¹⁶ ICTY, IT-95-14/2-T, *Prosecutor v. Kordić and Cerkez*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 26 February 2001, para. 180. See also ICTY, IT-95-16-T, *Prosecutor v. Kupreškić et al.*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 14 January 2000, para. 549; ICTY, IT-96-23-T and IT-96-23/1-T, *Prosecutor v. Kunarac, Kovac and Vukovic*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 22 February 2001, para. 425.

¹⁷ ICTY, IT-96-23-T and IT-96-23/1-T, *Prosecutor v. Kunarac, Kovac and Vukovic*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 22 February 2001, para. 424. See also ICTY, IT-94-1-T, *Prosecutor v. Tadić* (alias “Dule”), Judgement, Trial Chamber, 7 May 1997, para. 644.

¹⁸ ICTY, IT-94-1-T, *Prosecutor v. Tadić* (alias “Dule”), Judgement, Trial Chamber, 7 May 1997, para. 644. “It is sufficient to show that enough individuals were targeted in the course of the attack, or that they were targeted in such a way as to satisfy the Chamber that the attack was in fact directed against a civilian ‘population’, rather than against a limited and randomly selected number of individuals”. See ICTY, IT-96-23-T and IT-96-23/1-A, *Prosecutor v. Kunarac, Kovac and Vukovic*, Judgement, Appeals Chamber, 12 June 2001, para. 90; ICTY, IT-97-24-T, *Prosecutor v. Stakić*, Judgement, 31 July 2003, para. 623. See also ICTY, IT-03-69-T, *Prosecutor v. Jovica Stanišić and Franko Simatović*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 30 May 2013, paras. 964-965.

¹⁹ While the government might contend that the overall number of extrajudicial killings involved in the GBAO crackdown are smaller in size than some of the better known cases (Syria, Yazidis, Philippines), it is crucial to recognise both the relative small size of the overall group (approx. 200,000) as well as the devastating toll the killings and crimes took on the entirety of the group. The authors have particularly benefited from the work of Suzanne-Levi Sanchez who explains that Pamiris’ social networks work to “limit outside control and foreign influences to preserve the languages, culture, and religion as well as for their own security” (Levi-Sanchez 2018), which further highlights how the killing of just one member of the group is a profound event. Shared history and culture profoundly bind Pamiris to each other and their leaders, further increasing the social, safety, and cultural loss that occurs when activists are targeted. One example was that of Alisher Kimatshoev, 47-year-old, a driver who was violently detained in front of his 9-year-old son when police barged into his home brandishing machine guns (Radio Ozodi 2022). His body was later found in a hospital morgue without explanation. Khovar Gulobshoev, who was 45 and a married father of two, was killed under mysterious circumstances after being deported back to Tajikistan from Russia. Relatives state

victims were found and, in particular, the prevalence across GBAO and Tajikistan of the recurring patterns of violations amounting to crimes (International Partnership for Human Rights 2022).²⁰ The attack was “systematic”, because of the organised nature of the crimes and the improbability of their random occurrence. As shown above, the commission of crimes by agents of the Tajik government was not random, spontaneous, or isolated. Rather, the crimes were committed as part of a pattern of organised conduct, following instructions, encouragement and endorsement by high-level Tajik state authorities and senior members of state institutions, and implemented by many physical perpetrators.²¹

Considering the requirement that the violations were committed pursuant to or in furtherance of a State or organisational policy, the Rome Statute states that the State or organisation must “actively promote or encourage” the attack against the civilian population.²²

The conduct of Tajik authorities demonstrates that the underlying acts were committed in furtherance of a state policy. This conduct includes

that “he was not a member of any terrorist group”, so there was no justification for his detention. Gulobshoev lived in various places and never fulfilled his dream of “finally living with his family in his own home” (Radio Ozodi 2022).

²⁰ On the definition of “widespread”, see ICTY, IT-04-74-T, *Prosecutor v. Jadranko Prlić*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 29 May 2013, para. 41; ICTY, IT-95-14-T, *Prosecutor v. Blaškić*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 3 March 2000, para. 206; ICTR, ICTR-00-56-A, *Prosecutor v. Augustin Ndindiliyimana, François-Xavier Nzuwonemeye and Innocent Sagahutu*, Judgement, Appeals Chamber, 11 February 2014, para. 260; ICTR, ICTR-2000-61-T, *Prosecutor v. Gatete*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 31 March 2011, para. 631; ICC, ICC-01/09-01/11, *Prosecutor v. Ruto, Kosgey and Sang*, “Decision on the confirmation of charges”, Pre-Trial Chamber, 23 January 2012, para. 176-177; ICC, ICC-01/05-01/08, *Prosecutor v. Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo*, Judgement pursuant to Article 74 of the Statute, Trial Chamber, 21 March 2016, para. 163.

²¹ On the definition of “systematic”, see ICTY, IT-04-74-T, *Prosecutor v. Jadranko Prlić*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 29 May 2013, para. 41; ICTY, IT-95-5/18-T, *Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić*, Public Redacted Version of Judgement Issued on 24 March 2016 – Volume I, Trial Chamber, 24 March 2016, para. 477; ICTR, ICTR-00-56-A, *Prosecutor v. Augustin Ndindiliyimana, François-Xavier Nzuwonemeye and Innocent Sagahutu*, Judgement, Appeals Chamber, 11 February 2014, para. 260; ICTR, ICTR-2000-61-T, *Prosecutor v. Gatete*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 31 March 2011, para. 631; ICTY, IT-96-23-T and IT-96-23/1-T, *Prosecutor v. Kunarac, Kovač and Vuković*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 22 February 2001, para. 429; ICTY, IT-96-23-T and IT-96-23/1-A, *Prosecutor v. Kunarac, Kovač and Vuković*, Judgement, Appeals Chamber, 12 June 2001, para. 94; ICC, ICC-01/09-01/11, *Prosecutor v. Ruto, Kosgey and Sang*, “Decision on the confirmation of charges”, Pre-Trial Chamber, 23 January 2012, para. 210.

²² ICC, Elements of Crimes, p. 3. Relevant jurisprudence further provides that “an attack which is ‘planned, directed, organised’, as opposed to ‘spontaneous or [consisting of] isolated acts,’ satisfies the policy requirement”. See e.g. ICC, ICC-01/09-01/11, *Prosecutor v. Ruto, Kosgey and Sang*, “Decision on the confirmation of charges”, Pre-Trial Chamber, 23 January 2012, para. 210. See e.g. ICC, ICC-01/05-01/08, *Prosecutor v. Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo*, Judgement pursuant to Article 74 of the Statute, Trial Chamber, 21 March 2016, para. 160; ICC, ICC-01/04-02/06-2359, *Prosecutor v. Bosco Ntaganda*, Judgment, Trial Chamber, 8 July 2019, para. 674; A/HRC/25/CRP.1, para. 1063.

statements by its officials encouraging or condoning the commission of abuses. Indeed, immediately following the May 2022 violence, President Rahmon admitted giving the order to “neutralise persons armed with weapons” because, he said, “there was no other way out” and “they provoked the latest events, we already had information. They were taken over by foreign masters. In a short period of time, they were financed with 26 million somoni (more than \$2.3 million). And they were led from abroad. That same terrorist Islamic Revival Party and its masters. The goal is to carry out a coup” (Radio Ozodi 2022).

The ICC has looked at the following factors as evidence that violations are committed as part of a State policy: planning and preparations;²³ the involvement of State officials and institutions in the commission of violations;²⁴ the coordination of different intelligence and security entities;²⁵ and the use of State resources.²⁶ Rights violations that occurred as part of the GBAO crackdown were planned, directed and organised by, and involved the coordinated action of different Tajik government entities and the investment of a considerable amount of state resources (Novastan 2022).

The recurrent patterns of violence, including in multiple locations,²⁷ and similar patterns of violations also indicate a policy.²⁸ The use of force patterns identified could be found in multiple locations, with specific pat-

²³ See e.g. ICC, ICC-01/04-02/06-2359, *Prosecutor v. Bosco Ntaganda*, Judgment, Trial Chamber, 8 July 2019, para. 686; ICC, ICC-01/04-01/07, *Prosecutor v. Germain Katanga*, Judgment pursuant to article 74 of the Statute, Trial Chamber, 7 March 2014, para. 1147; ICC, ICC-01/09, Decision Pursuant to Article 15 of the Rome Statute on the Authorisation of an Investigation into the Situation in the Republic of Kenya, 31 March 2010, Pre-Trial Chamber, para. 118.

²⁴ See e.g. ICC, ICC-01/05-01/08, *Prosecutor v. Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo*, Judgment pursuant to Article 74 of the Statute, Trial Chamber, 21 March 2016, para. 160; ICC, ICC-02/04-01/15, *Prosecutor v. Dominic Ongwen*, Judgment, Trial Chamber, 4 February 2021, para. 2679; ICC, ICC-01/04-02/06-2359, *Prosecutor v. Bosco Ntaganda*, Judgment, Trial Chamber, 8 July 2019, para. 674; A/HRC/28/69, para. 49.

²⁵ ICC, ICC-01/19, Decision Pursuant to Article 15 of the Rome Statute on the Authorisation of an Investigation into the Situation in the People's Republic of Bangladesh/Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Pre-Trial Chamber, 14 November 2019, para. 92; A/HRC/S-17/2/Add.1, para. 105.

²⁶ See e.g. ICC, ICC-01/05-01/08, *Prosecutor v. Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo*, Judgment pursuant to Article 74 of the Statute, Trial Chamber, 21 March 2016, para. 160; ICC, ICC-01/04-02/06-2359, *Prosecutor v. Bosco Ntaganda*, Judgment, Trial Chamber, 8 July 2019, para. 674; A/HRC/28/69, para. 674; ICC, ICC-02/04-01/15, *Prosecutor v. Dominic Ongwen*, Judgment, Trial Chamber, 4 February 2021, para. 2679.

²⁷ See e.g. ICC, ICC-01/05-01/08, *Prosecutor v. Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo*, Judgment pursuant to Article 74 of the Statute, Trial Chamber, 21 March 2016, para. 677; A/HRC/25/CRP.1, para. 1062; A/HRC/39/CRP.2, para. 1480.

²⁸ See e.g. A/HRC/30/CRP.2, para. 591; A/HRC/25/CRP.1, para. 1084.

terns found across GBAO. Mass arrests, as well as targeted arrest operations, almost exclusively directed at Pamiris, were also conducted in a similar fashion across different locations, including inside Pamiri communities in Russia, with victims across multiple detention facilities operated by State entities describing similar patterns of torture, ill-treatment, and even sexual violence.

Another indicator of the existence of a policy is the systematic identification of victims.²⁹ The patterns of targeting Pamiris as a group are conduct indicating policy. As extensively demonstrated in a variety of sources, Tajik state entities made a concerted effort to adopt and violently enforce strict rules, prohibitions on language and penalties that targeted especially Pamiris, particularly with respect to the use of Pamiri languages (Amnesty International 2024a). They also targeted Pamiri human rights defenders and Pamiris demanding equality, such as Faromuz Irgashev, and the end to institutionalised discrimination, including those defying restrictions on the right to assembly.

The systematic failure of the Tajik government State to condemn violations, and to prevent, investigate, prosecute and punish them, and the impunity enjoyed by alleged perpetrators,³⁰ is further evidence of a policy. As shown here, there is a clear pattern of impunity, in particular in relation to, but not limited to, unlawful deaths, extra-judicial executions, enforced disappearances, torture and ill-treatment, and persecution.³¹

²⁹ See e.g. ICC, ICC-01/21, Decision on the Prosecutor's request for authorisation of an investigation pursuant to Article 15(3) of the Statute on the Philippines, Pre-Trial Chamber, 15 September 2021, para. 99; A/HRC/51/CRP.3, para. 431. As established by various eyewitness accounts and human rights reports, the identification and targeting of the victims of repression was the result of a concerted and coordinated effort by security and intelligence forces and the judicial system, including prosecutors. It is straightforward to establish a pattern of instrumentalisation of the judicial system to suppress acts of protest and solidarity that culminated in systematic impunity in relation to violations.

³⁰ See e.g. A/HRC/32/CRP.1, para. 260; A/HRC/25/CRP.1, para. 1085.

³¹ This article also considers the organised concealing of violations. This includes a pattern of authorities blaming "extremists", "criminal groups", or "terrorists" for all of the deaths and injuries caused by the unnecessary or disproportionate use of force by security forces, as well as of forcing individuals to confess to crimes they did not commit to absolve the State of responsibility, the victims to withdraw their allegations of violations, and families of victims to blame "opposition groups" for violations by Tajik security forces or confess to crimes they did not commit. Other efforts to conceal violations included withholding bodies of those killed because of the use of force by or in the custody of State security and intelligence forces. Authorities also pressured families to return death certificates or simply denied issuing them. State officials denied reports of injuries caused by weapons and ammunition used by the security forces. The strategy of concealing violations by State authorities was accompanied by misinformation and disinformation by Tajik state media (RFE/RL 2022).

Underlying acts

Murder

Murder is defined under international criminal law as the unlawful and intentional killing of a human being.³² The death of the victim must result from an act or omission of the perpetrator, who possessed the intent to kill, or the intent to cause serious bodily harm which the perpetrator should reasonably have known might lead to death.³³

A pattern of violations of the right to life in GBAO are easily established. Victims were killed because of the use of unnecessary force, extra-judicial executions, and deaths in custody in violation of international human rights law (Eurasianet 2022). Deaths were the result of intentional use of lethal force against persons posing no imminent threat of death or serious injury. Further, victims who died in custody were subjected to torture or ill-treatment with the intent to cause serious bodily harm, which the perpetrator should reasonably have known might lead to death.

Imprisonment, Torture and Enforced Disappearance

Imprisonment as a crime against humanity is defined as the imprisonment or otherwise severe deprivation of liberty of one or more persons by the perpetrator, who is aware of the factual circumstances that established the gravity of the conduct.³⁴ The imprisonment must be in violation of fundamental rules of international law.³⁵ This includes arbitrary deprivation of liberty.³⁶ On assessing the arbitrary nature, jurisprudence considered following factors: whether there was a valid warrant of arrest; the detainee was informed of the reason for their arrest; the detainee was formally charged; and the detainee was informed of any procedural rights.³⁷

³² ICC, Elements of Crimes, art. 7(1)(a); ICTR, ICTR-96-4-T, *Prosecutor v. Akayesu*, Judgment, Trial Chamber, 5 September 1998, para. 589.

³³ *Prosecutor v. Akayesu*, Judgment, Trial Chamber, 5 September 1998, para. 589.

³⁴ ICC, Elements of Crimes, art. 7(1)(e).

³⁵ ICC, Elements of Crimes, art. 7(1)(e).

³⁶ See e.g. ICTY, IT-00-39-T, *Prosecutor v. Krajisnik*, Judgment and Sentence, Trial Chamber, 27 September 2006, para. 752.

³⁷ See e.g. ICTR, ICTR-99-46-T, *Prosecutor v. Ntagerura et al.*, Judgment, 25 February 2004, para. 702. Based on international human rights law, whether an arrest was based on a legitimate ground for deprivation of liberty is also considered. The duration of a detention does not lessen its severity. ICC, ICC-01/17-9-Red 09-11-2017, Public Redacted Version of "Decision Pursuant to Article 15 of the Rome Statute on the Authorisation of an Investigation into the Situation in the Republic of Burundi", ICC-01/17-X-9-US-Exp, 25 October 2017, Pre-Trial Chamber, 25 October 2017, para. 86 ("The brevity of detention alone cannot be brought

Based on international human rights law, whether an arrest was based on a legitimate ground for deprivation of liberty is also considered. The duration of a detention does not lessen its severity.

Protesters have been arbitrarily arrested and detained by members of Tajikistan's state entities, who were aware that their acts constituted violations. Many victims were arbitrarily arrested, detained, and convicted and some were sentenced to long prison terms solely for exercising rights protected under international human rights law, including the rights to belief and religion, to freedom of expression, and of peaceful assembly. Victims were also convicted and sentenced following unfair trials before courts lacking independence and impartiality. There is a pattern of prison sentences imposed after trials involving, *inter alia*, the denial of the right to a lawyer of one's choice, torture and forced confessions (Sorokina 2023).

Based on the evidence, there are reasonable grounds to believe that imprisonment as an underlying act of crimes against humanity was committed as part of the widespread and systematic attack directed against a civilian population.

Torture is the intentional infliction of severe physical or mental pain or suffering upon one or more persons, upon a person in the custody or under the control of a perpetrator.³⁸ For an act to amount to the crime of torture a severe degree of pain and suffering must be reached.³⁹

Victims, including protesters, members of ethnic and religious minorities, activists challenging institutionalised discrimination, lawyers, journalists, family members of victims, public and religious figures have been subjected to severe physical or mental pain and suffering inflicted intentionally during their arrest, transfer to, and detention at facilities operated by different State entities, including unofficial sites, and during interrogation (Amnesty International 2024a). Moreover, prosecutorial officials

forward as an argument to deny the severity of the deprivation of physical liberty"); ICC, ICC-01/14-01/18-403-Corr-Red, *Prosecutor v. Alfred Yekatom and Patrice-Edouard Ngaïssona*, Corrected version of 'Decision on the confirmation of charges against Alfred Yekatom and Patrice-Edouard Ngaïssona', Pre-Trial Chamber, 11 December 2019, para. 119 ("[N]either the duration of the imprisonment nor the number of persons imprisoned denies, as such, the severity of the deprivation of liberty").

³⁸ ICC, *Elements of Crimes*, art. 7(1)(f). It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to, lawful sanctions under international law. See Rome Statute, art. 7(2)(e).

³⁹ Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Art. 1; ICC, ICC-01/05-01/08-424, *Prosecutor v. Bemba*, Decision Pursuant to Article 61(7)(a) and (b) of the Rome Statute on the Charges of the Prosecutor, Pre-Trial Chamber, 15 June 2009, para. 194. The perpetrator must have intended the conduct and that the victim endured severe pain or suffering. ICC, ICC-01/05-01/08-424, *Prosecutor v. Bemba*, Decision Pursuant to Article 61(7)(a) and (b) of the Rome Statute on the Charges of the Prosecutor, Pre-Trial Chamber, 15 June 2009, para. 193.

and judges dismissed reports of torture, while courts used confessions obtained under torture to convict persons in connection with the protests.

Enforced disappearance means the arrest, detention or abduction of persons by, or with the authorisation, support or acquiescence of, a State or a political organisation, followed by a refusal to acknowledge that deprivation of liberty or to give information on the fate or whereabouts of those persons, with the intention of removing them from the protection of the law.⁴⁰

Tajik authorities routinely held detainees incommunicado and/or in solitary confinement,⁴¹ refusing to inform their families of their whereabouts and, in some cases, placing them outside the protection of the law and amounting to enforced disappearance. The lack of compliance with procedural safeguards for detention which should protect against disappearance, meant that in many cases, families were unaware of the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones until they were released, or were transferred to official places of detention. These periods lasted days, weeks and sometimes more than a month. These practices were intentional.⁴²

Therefore, it is possible to conclude that there are reasonable grounds to believe that enforced disappearance as an underlying act of crimes against humanity was committed as part of the widespread and systematic attack directed against a civilian population in the context of the GBAO crackdown.

Mental Element

Under the Rome Statute, a perpetrator must have known that the conduct was part of, or have intended the conduct to be part of, a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population. The perpetrator must have acted with knowledge of the broader context of the attack, and with knowledge that his acts (or omissions) formed part of the widespread or systematic attack against the civilian population.⁴³

⁴⁰ Rome Statute, art. 7(2)(i).

⁴¹ On inhumane conditions of detention as under inhumane acts, see e.g. IT-04-74-T, *Prosecutor v. Jadranko Prlić*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 29 May 2013, para. 80.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ ICTR, ICTR-00-56-A, *Prosecutor v. Ndindiliyimana, Nzuwonemeye and Sagahutu*, Judgement, Appeals Chamber, 11 February 2014, para. 260. However, it is not necessary that the perpetrator be informed of the details of the attack, or that he approves its purpose or the goal behind it. It is irrelevant whether the perpetrator participated in the attack for purely personal reasons. See ICTY, IT-04-74-T, *Prosecutor v. Jadranko Prlić*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 29 May 2013, para. 45. It is sufficient that, through his acts or the function which he willingly accepted, he knowingly took the risk of participating in the implementation of that attack.

Members of Tajikistan's state security and intelligence forces, as well as members of the judiciary and prosecutors were involved in the commission of the underlying acts of crimes against humanity listed throughout this article.

High-level State authorities publicly commented on the attack directed against the civilian population and encouraged, sanctioned, and endorsed underlying acts through statements justifying them. Different Tajik state entities planned, directed, and organised their action and invested a considerable amount of State resources. Official statements were publicly issued. There were recurring patterns of violence in different locations over a prolonged period by the same entities and patterns of targeting certain groups of victims across all entities and of impunity. Representatives of different Tajik government entities used the same terminology to describe, denigrate and delegitimise victims. Authorities across the system were involved in misinformation and disinformation campaigns, as well as campaigns of harassment, intimidation and reprisals against victims, their families and supporters.

Persecution

International criminal law recognises persecution as a crime against humanity, where the necessary contextual elements are met. The Rome Statute, Article 7(2)(g) describes persecution as a severe deprivation of fundamental rights contrary to international law by reason of the identity of the group or collectivity.⁴⁴ The jurisprudence of international criminal courts and tribunals has recognised a wide variety of fundamental rights that come within this notion. These include the right to life, liberty and the security of person, the right not to be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and the right not to be subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention,⁴⁵ as well as the rights to freedom of religion, freedom of expression, freedom of thought, freedom of association, of peaceful assembly, freedom of move-

ICTY, IT-97-25-T, *Prosecutor v. Krnojelac*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 15 March 2002, para. 59; ICTY, IT-95-14-T, *Prosecutor v. Blaškić*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 3 March 2000, para. 251; ICTY, IT-96-23/1-A, *Prosecutor v. Kunarac, Kovac and Vuković*, Judgement", Appeals Chamber, 12 June 2001, para. 102-103.

⁴⁴ Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998, art. 7(2)(g).

⁴⁵ ICTY, IT-95-14-T, *Prosecutor v. Blaškić*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 3 March 2000, para. 220. See also ICTY, IT-97-25-T, *Prosecutor v. Krnojelac*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 15 March 2002, para. 433; ICTY, IT-98-30/1-T, *Prosecutor v. Kvočka*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 2 November 2001, para. 186; ICTY, IT-94-1-T, *Prosecutor v. Tadić*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 7 May 1997, para. 710.

ment, equality, education, privacy, personal dignity, work, security and property.⁴⁶

In the context of the GBAO crackdown, the Tajik government has actively repressed ethnic Pamiris, who face constant discrimination and subjugation with reports of torture, extrajudicial killings and arbitrary arrests at the hands of Tajik security forces (Amnesty International 2024b). Instances like those of the violent kidnapping and subsequent execution of Gulbiddin Ziyobekov in 2021, as well as the gunning down of local Pamiri activist Mamadbokir Mamadbokirov in 2022 highlight the injustices perpetrated on the people of GBAO (Amnesty International, 2024b). In addition to extrajudicial killings, religious and cultural leaders are frequently imprisoned at the hands of security services. Ulfathonim Mamadshoeva, a prominent journalist and human rights champion, was arbitrarily arrested in her home in May of 2022 and was sentenced to 21 years in prison, on the basis that she was responsible for attempting to organise a coup and was allegedly incentivised by a foreign government to do so (OMCT 2022). Pamiris in GBAO are additionally often subject to racist abuse from Tajik authorities, alongside the suppression of traditional customs and religion (Eurasianet 2022).

Limitations of the International Criminal Court

While the ICC presents a viable option for prosecuting the Tajik government's crimes against humanity, many victims of abuses have often felt let down by or stymied by the ICC's various shortcomings, politicised proceedings, and exceedingly slow pace of prosecution. Indeed, the ICC is only able to prosecute a handful of cases in any given investigation, and it tends to focus on senior officials or others responsible for crimes at a high level.

As of July 2024, the ICC had charged a total of 54 different individuals with war crimes, crimes against humanity, or genocide, and an addi-

⁴⁶ See e.g. ICC, ICC-01/12-01/18-461-Corr-Red, *Prosecutor v. Al Hassan Ag Abdoul Aziz Ag Mohamed Ag Mahmoud*, Decision on Confirmation of Charges against Al Hassan, Pre-Trial Chamber, 13 November 2019, para. 664; ICC-01/12-01/18, *Prosecutor v. Al Hassan*, Decision on the Prosecutor's Application for the Issuance of a Warrant of Arrest, Pre-Trial Chamber, 22 May 2018, para. 88; ICC, ICC-01/17-X, Decision Pursuant to Article 15 of the Rome Statute on the Authorisation of an Investigation into the Situation in the Republic of Burundi, Pre-Trial Chamber, 9 November 2017, para. 132. See ICTY, IT-95-16-T, *Prosecutor v. Kupreškić et al.*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 14 January 2000, para. 615 (physical acts, and other discriminatory acts involving attacks on political, social and economic rights); ICTY, IT-98-32-T, *Prosecutor v. Vasiljević*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 29 November 2002, para. 246 (physical and mental harm, as well as cultural and property destruction); Office of the Prosecutor, Policy on the Crime of Gender Persecution, International Criminal Court (ICC), 7 December 2022, para. 23.

tional eight for related offenses such as witness intimidation (Human Rights First 2024). Eleven defendants have been convicted and 24 are still at large. The first nine investigations that the ICC opened were in sub-Saharan or north African countries. Since 2015, though, new investigations have covered a broader geographical range, including countries in Europe (Georgia, Ukraine), Latin America (Venezuela), Asia (Bangladesh/Myanmar, Afghanistan, the Philippines), the Middle East (Palestine), and sub-Saharan Africa (Burundi). Most of the court's current fugitives are accused of crimes in Ukraine, Darfur, Georgia, and Libya (Human Rights First 2024).

Some of the limitations the ICC faces are enforcement of its decrees.⁴⁷ The ICC's authority has also more recently been challenged by its own member states, such as Mongolia and Hungary. Both countries have allowed ICC fugitives entry and ignored arrest warrants when Vladimir Putin visited Mongolia in 2024 and Benjamin Netanyahu visited Hungary in 2025 (Autin 2024, Spike 2025). Hungary displayed its determination to further erode the ICC's legitimacy by announcing in June 2025 that it would withdraw officially from the ICC completely (Spike, 2025).⁴⁸ In October 2025, another ICC member, Tajikistan also hosted Putin on its territory without so much as a passing reference to its obligation to arrest pursuant to the Rome Statute. (Associated Press, October 2025).

Another obstacle the ICC could face is gaining access to GBAO for investigation and collecting testimony. Recently, it faced a similar situation regarding evidence collection in Russian-occupied Sevastopol and Donetsk, where ICC investigators have had to rely on the testimonies from individuals who have fled to gather evidence to prove war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Germany: Using Universal Jurisdiction

Given the difficulty of proceeding to a prosecution at the ICC, a more promising avenue for pursuing accountability may be in Germany's national courts, utilising *universal jurisdiction*. Universal jurisdiction is based on the notion that "certain crimes are so serious that the duty to

⁴⁷ Franziska Boehme points to the fact that in 2009, the African Union (AU) passed a "non-cooperation decision" that declared AU members should not cooperate with the ICC on the arrest of president Al Bashir of Sudan and later passed an ICC non-cooperation policy that targeted any AU head of state in 2013 (Boehme 2022).

⁴⁸ These recent controversies buttress Bohme's argument that collaboration with the ICC has now become a calculated political move for states and how they decide to protect their regional institutions and interests (Bohme 2022).

prosecute them transcends all borders”, effectively enabling states to claim jurisdiction over alleged perpetrators – regardless of where the offenses took place or the nationality of those involved (CJA 2024).⁴⁹

Universal jurisdiction is one of the key principles codified in the German Code of Crimes Against International Law (CCAIL) (*Völkerstrafgesetzbuch*, VStGB). The CCAIL regulates crimes against public international law, including the offenses of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression. It came into force in Germany on June 30, 2002, to bring the German criminal law into accordance with the Rome Statute and supplement the German Criminal Code (*Strafgesetzbuch*, StGB) (CCAIL, art. 2).

In June 2025, Germany passed a landmark legislative reform entitled: the Law for the Development of International Criminal law, which significantly strengthened universal jurisdiction in Germany. (Fibgar, 2024).

Currently, there are estimated to be around 30,000 Tajiks living in Germany, many of whom themselves are victims who have fled Tajikistan as a direct result of political repression.⁵⁰ Centred around Germany, Poland, Lithuania, and Austria, many in this community have mobilised to form civil society organisations. As evidenced by the April 2025 ICC filing, some have collected evidence of abuses in Tajikistan that could be used to petition Germany’s courts to initiate an investigation and prosecution.

Seeking prosecution for crimes against humanity in Tajikistan through universal jurisdiction would require cooperation with international bodies and other countries due to jurisdictional challenges. Plaintiffs, represented by human rights organisations or lawyers, would gather evidence to support their case, including witness testimony and documentary evidence. Defendants would require representation to defend themselves against the allegations. Victims of the alleged crimes may have the opportunity to participate in the proceedings, seeking legal representation to protect their rights. Defendants would have the right to a fair trial with procedural safeguards in place. If the accused individuals are not present in Germany, extradition may be sought from Tajikistan or other countries where they are located, which can involve legal procedures and diplomatic

⁴⁹ Over the last 15 years, Germany and other nations such as Spain, Belgium, and Argentina have used universal jurisdiction to prosecute criminals in their domestic legal systems, convicting those who have committed serious crimes in foreign nations.

⁵⁰ See, e.g., Dr. Olga Gulina, “Diaspora Engagement Mapping: TAJIKISTAN”, EU Global Diaspora Facility, October 2020, https://diasporaforddevelopment.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/CF_Tajikistan-v.5.pdf; “Tajikistan”, Migration Data Platform for Evidence-Based Regional Development - IOM: UN Migration, 2024, <https://seeecadata.iom.int/msite/seeecadata/country/tajikistan>; “Tajik Refugees in Europe: In Search of a Better Life”, Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting, November 2, 2020, <https://cabar.asia/en/tajik-refugees-in-europe-in-search-of-a-better-life-2>.

negotiations. Judicial proceedings would follow, with the court evaluating evidence and determining guilt or innocence, leading to potential convictions. Challenges may arise due to complexities related to international law, diplomatic relations, and evidence gathering in Tajikistan.

Case of Anwar Raslan

There are many examples of Germany exercising universal jurisdiction and securing convictions or prominent investigations. One of the most notable examples was the trial and conviction of Anwar Raslan, a Syrian colonel under the regime of Bashar al-Assad, who was accused of 4,000 counts of torture and a further 58 counts of murder, rape, and sexual assault (Cornish 2020). Under the al-Assad regime, Raslan leads a unit of the General Intelligence Directorate responsible for the operation of al-Khatib prison, which held demonstrators, rights activists, and political opponents of al-Assad in appalling conditions, where they were regularly subjected to torture, beatings, and sexual assault (SJAC 2024). In 2022, Raslan was sentenced to life in prison for his crimes against humanity, one of the most significant examples in the fight to secure justice for those harmed at the hands of the al-Assad regime, and a major step in the development of trials utilising universal jurisdiction (Amnesty International 2022).

Case of Taha al-Jumailly

Another case is that of Taha al-Jumailly, an Iraqi man accused of war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity who went to trial in April 2020. Remarkably, al-Jumailly was the first member of the Islamic State to be convicted of genocide for his role in the death and torture of a Yazidi woman and her young daughter (Williams 2024). In many important respects comparable to the Pamiris, the Yazidi people are a religious minority whose case presents hope for prosecuting the crimes of the Tajik government.⁵¹ Al-Jumailly was married to a German national living in Iraq, and together in 2015 they purchased a Yazidi woman and her daughter as slaves, holding them in appalling conditions and at one point forcing them to remain outside in the Iraqi sun during the middle of summer (Koller 2023). As a result, the Yazidi girl died, and al-Jumailly fled the country to

⁵¹ Native to Iraq and Syria, the Yazidis were violently persecuted by ISIS for their religious differences, with the massacre of 5,000 Yazidis occurring in 2014 and continued abuses thereafter have included kidnapping and sex-trafficking (Alaca 2020).

be eventually arrested in Greece and extradited to Germany on grounds of universal jurisdiction (BBC News 2020). He was tried and found guilty on all counts in 2021, with the judge sentencing him to life for crimes against humanity and genocide, detailing al-Jumailly's actions were committed "with the intent to eliminate the Yazidi religious minority" (Yönt 2021).

Prosecutions grounded on universal jurisdiction, however, are not limited to Iraq and Syria, but have been used to pursue the perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide.⁵² Another case regards Myanmar and the events preceding and following the coup in 2021. In 2023, a case was established in Germany to investigate the actions of Myanmar's military regarding crimes against humanity and other charges (Pelliconi 2023).

Germany's use of universal jurisdiction is particularly helpful when red tape regulations curtail the ICC's jurisdiction. This can be seen in the investigation of Russia's war crimes and crimes against humanity in Ukraine (Reuters 2023). Germany is currently laying the groundwork to begin prosecution. Finally, German courts are also being asked to take on a case regarding Belarus and President Lukashenko's roles in committing crimes against humanity (Al Jazeera 2021). In each of these cases, the case has no relation to Germany – neither the defendants nor the victims are German or living in Germany – however, Germany has declared its duty to protect human rights and fill in gaps for accountability, making it the ideal avenue for justice for the Pamiris.

As these cases exhibit, there is an established path for prosecuting those who commit serious offenses that bear a striking similarity to those committed in Tajikistan, where impunity remains the norm. Extrajudicial killings, kidnappings, arbitrary imprisonment and torture form the heart of the Raslan, al-Jumaily cases tried using universal jurisdiction in Germany. The Tajik government's crimes against humanity in GBAO deserve international attention and the exercise of universal jurisdiction to bring perpetrators to justice.

However, there are a variety of obstacles in prosecuting Tajik officials responsible for crimes against humanity. One of the primary challenges

⁵² In Germany, Onesphore Rwabukombe was convicted of crimes against humanity and sentenced to fourteen years for his role in the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, which was responsible for the death of around 800,000 members of the Tutsi minority group (Chambers 2015). Rwabukombe was mayor of the town of Kiziguo during the violent ethnic cleansing and was found to have ordered the killing of hundreds of Tutsis, who were taking refuge in a local church at the time (VOA 2011). Living in Germany since 2002, the case was originally brought to trial in 2014 (where the former mayor was found guilty), but judges were "unable to determine whether Rwabukombe had acted with the specific intention to commit genocide" (Karuhanga 2015). In a retrial the following year, it was established that his actions *were* in fact directed at the entire population and the Federal Court of Justice increased his punishment to life in prison without parole, as they felt the original sentence was too lenient (Welle 2015).

is the difficulty of obtaining credible evidence (Trial International 2019, 9). Gathering reliable evidence from witnesses who have experienced or are still present in a conflict zone or areas under surveillance, and gaining access to documentation and forensic evidence that can withstand scrutiny in court is a major challenge. Further barriers to trial include the discretion of the prosecutor. Since neither party is a German national and the accused is not expected to be in Germany, a federal prosecutor could decline to investigate (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Similar obstacles make it difficult to convict those who are brought to trial. Other cases have resulted in the overturning of rulings, like Congolese military commander Jean-Pierre Bemba, accused of overseeing crimes against humanity in the Central African Republic through the early 2000s. He was originally found guilty by the ICC in 2016 and sentenced to 18 years in prison, but his conviction was overturned on appeal in 2018 and he was acquitted (ICC 2019, 3). Uhuru Kenyatta, former President of Kenya, was similarly charged by the ICC for crimes against humanity for his role in the violence that followed the 2007 presidential election (Coalition for the ICC 2024). The charges were eventually dropped after much controversy, as key prosecution witnesses withdrew from the trial, in what the ICC has claimed is witness tampering, intimidation, and non-cooperation from the Kenyatta government (Dawson 2014). These examples demonstrate the difficulties in gathering evidence sufficient to prosecute those who commit offenses abroad and highlight how crucial the support of like-minded governments, institutions and human rights groups would be in a Tajik case (ICC 2020, 14).

The key driver for a case in either the ICC or Germany's national courts will be Pamiri and Tajik activists living outside the country, especially in Germany, Austria, Poland, and Lithuania who petition Germany's courts. A similar dynamic was on display in Austria and Germany in 2018, when Syrian nationals lobbied for the filing of charges against officials for crimes against humanity carried out under al-Assad.⁵³

Similarly here, the German Federal Public Prosecutor should investigate the crimes committed in Tajikistan, by focusing on officials who bear the overall responsibility for the crimes, such as Saimumin Yatimov, the head of the Tajikistan's State Committee for National Security and Colonel General Ramazon Rahimov, also known as Ramazon Rahimzoda, Tajik-

⁵³ This led to filings by the European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights and the Centre for the Enforcement of Human Rights International in Germany and Austria. The judiciaries in both countries have the power to issue international arrest warrants if deemed fit (ECCHR n.d.). Former leader of the Syrian Air Force, Jamil Hassan, who was issued an international arrest warrant in Germany in 2018, was subsequently sentenced to life imprisonment in absentia in France during May 2024 (Ayad 2024).

istan's Minister of Internal Affairs. These two officials have been the eyes and ears of President Rahmon since 2010 and 2012, respectively, overseeing the most repressive stretches of a three-decade-long reign. Other key officials include Shohruh Saidzoda, deputy head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Yusuf Rahmon, the Prosecutor-General of Tajikistan, and Imomiddin Sattorov, the Ambassador of Tajikistan to Germany and a former Ambassador of Tajikistan to the Russian Federation. As senior ministers, deputies, and diplomats these five officials are responsible for the various crimes against humanity listed above, including facilitating and aiding and abetting transnational repression, the abuse and misuse of INTERPOL, and other transnational abuses of Pamiri rights defenders, journalists, and peaceful opposition figures.

Even though these officials are still in Tajikistan, certain steps can be taken to expedite the path to justice, such as issuing international arrest warrants. To take these steps, the Federal Public Prosecutor and the courts should be provided with additional resources by the state. The survivors of abuses and witnesses who live in Germany, Austria, Lithuania and Poland should receive appropriate legal support, witness protection, and the chance to see a measure of justice.

Some Tajik and Pamiri activists are already working to see that an investigation into the crimes against humanity detailed here will lead to the issuing of charges and international arrest warrants against relevant officials. Such action would raise public awareness about human rights violations in Tajikistan and increase pressure to prosecute the crimes through international criminal justice mechanisms. Moreover, human rights groups can advocate for greater diplomatic pressure on countries harbouring perpetrators or enabling human rights violations. By collaborating with governments willing to exercise universal jurisdiction, such groups can facilitate legal action in states with a strong track record of prosecuting such cases. Additionally, these organisations can push for international bodies like the ICC to open investigations and, when appropriate, file indictments, while also providing critical support for victims and witnesses involved in these proceedings.

Conclusion

The Tajik government's crimes against humanity against Pamiris, human rights defenders and political dissidents demand urgent international attention. Both the ICC and universal jurisdiction offer a promising tool for addressing these atrocities. In particular, Germany's track record in applying the principle to cases involving crimes against human-

ity provides a framework that can be adapted to the transgressions occurring in Tajikistan. As seen in the cases of Raslan, al-Jumailly, and Rwabukombe, international prosecution has proven effective in securing justice for victims and holding perpetrators accountable. Despite the challenges in gathering evidence and navigating political obstacles, the international community has a responsibility to respond to these crimes that shock the conscience of humanity, transcending borders and national interests. The above-mentioned examples, coupled with Germany's commitment to use universal jurisdiction makes the pursuit of justice for Tajikistan's victims possible. Ultimately, addressing the human rights crisis in Tajikistan through universal jurisdiction would not only afford accountability, but also would reaffirm a global commitment to justice.

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