

SEVEN SECRETS OF ISTARAVSHAN

BY EDWARD SCHIPKE

Despite being Tajikistan's fifth largest city and having a history stretching back to Alexander the Great, Istaravshan is seldom written about in English. Tourists frequently speed through the city bound for Khujand and the Silk Road cities Uzbekistan. Few take the time to explore the city and its hidden depths. In the following article, Edward Schipke pays tribute to this fascinating city. Its sleepy beauty hides seven secrets, some of which are rather dark.

Birds in cages watch over Istaravshan. Stationed on branches, signs, and thatched-mud walls, they flutter from perch to perch, eyeing passersby. A street ad displays bright-colored specimens backdropped by verdant field and woods, a subtle gray arrow tacked onto the frame pointing toward the shop. Istaravshan's birds are **one secret** of this city, Tajikistan's fifth most populous but a place poorly known beyond Central Asia. With an ancient heritage, and now square in the sights of a war against extremism, it deserves more attention from outsiders.

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The birds' keepers are the ten thousand or so families of Istaravshan: the teachers, pear vendors, bureaucrats, grape cultivators, schoolkids, knifsmiths, labor migrant remittance dependents, wood carvers, homemakers, handicraft college enrollees, mineral water bottlers, pensioners, police officers, mosque builders, leatherworkers, and shop clerks. They can be found thronging the central bazaar, a partly covered multi-block area with massive gates overseen by posters: of a Tajik girl in traditional dress, or of her austere President amid roses and the proclamation "We are building our Motherland with love!"

In streets radiating from the bazaar, every dozen meters or so, are children in pairs or groups, self-supervised, wearing clothes of Chinese mass-production vintage, with phrases such as "Suprer Neakers" or "Coke: Your Music." Girls consort while boys play football on a dirt-and-rock field, and representatives of both show off skills with shuttlecocks home-made from black plastic shreddings tied to a weight. Pranks and passions appear stenciled on surfaces: "HOOLIGAN," or "Ya ♥tebya." Older boys, if they haven't left for Russia, might hang out at the karate-do, while girls preparing for marriage can visit a shop advertised by a slender blonde in a Santa hat.

Beyond the vibrant humanity, though, are signs the city once saw better days. The fort-like "Red Flower" hotel, whose balustraded rooftop might once have served as a memorable spot for conversations over tea, threatens collapse with the slightest shake

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Three of Istaravshon's many caged birds.

credit: author

of earth or strong winter wind off the Ferghana plain. In Central Park, a grimy stone Lenin occupies a neglected field of plants, not far from a bronze, ideal Soviet family—father, mother, child, and infant—with faces toward the future. A young stone boy gazes at a cracked concrete basin, the mouths of his two fishes no longer filling the pool. A rusty Ferris wheel and defunct swing ride complete the picture.

“SIGNS OF THE SOVIET ERA EXTEND ALONG THE MAIN AVENUE, WHERE ANOTHER LENIN STANDS FLANKED BY INCONGRUOUS GOVERNMENT SLOGANS”

Signs of the Soviet era extend along the main avenue, where another Lenin stands flanked by incongruous government slogans, and stark male and female figurines exulting in Labor are frozen in a wall, obscured by pines. A hammer and sickle adorns a doorway, perhaps once leading to some apparatchik’s office, but now sporting a cheap plastic ad for a barbershop. Below the fading Cyrillic “Telephone–Telegraph” of the post office is the English “BEAUTY,” accompanied by two salons.

Behind the traces of Soviet civilization, however, lies the true glory of Istaravshan. A few steps west takes you to the old city, where a medieval visitor would feel at home. The neighborhood is a kaleidoscope of curves and sharp corners, among which appear doors and windows painted precisely in soft hues of lime and lavender, emerald and peach, sky blue and blood red. A thatched-mud corridor turns into a facade painstakingly constructed in rings of polygonal tiles around nested cupola-shaped layers set with green, black, yellow, and white square tiles. Around the corner, a home shines with three carved stars, each with four points: two long and two short. Lining the lower meter of a wall above the road, as though the art is nothing but a surface to collect mud splashes, is a long mosaic of seemingly haphazard tiles with dark and light hues of blue and red mixed in with black and white, creating a serpentine and violent effect. The old city’s decorations are a **second secret** of Istaravshan.

The neighborhood’s apex is the Blue Dome (Kök Gumbaz), topping a 15th-century mosque and madrassa, one of Istaravshan’s handful of exquisite Islamic complexes. On an autumn visit in 2014 the gate was unlocked and no caretaker was present. Local kids had assumed the role, guiding visitors on a spiraling staircase to the dome, around which brown and yellow weeds have gone airborne and taken root. Leaves blotted the central path, thin black lampposts unlit, the small gardens behind them overgrown. Classroom windows swung open, and dustless squares on the desks marked where books had lain. In the mosque, tools and banners lay strewn about, dust coating the floor’s hexagonal bricks, wall paint peeling or chipped away, water stains warping decorative tiles. This most well-known of Istaravshan’s landmarks nonetheless is a **secret — third on our tour** — given its current neglect, and relative to the famed Islamic structures of Uzbekistan to the west.

“THE BLUE DOME (KÖK GUMBAZ), TOPPING A 15TH-CENTURY MOSQUE AND MADRASSA, IS ONE OF ISTARAVSHAN’S HANDFUL OF EXQUISITE ISLAMIC COMPLEXES”



A decorated building in Istaravshon's old city

credit: author



Dusty desks in the old city's shuttered madrasa

credit: author

Offering escape from the old city's warren, and carrying us still further back in time, is the hill Mugh Teppa, where a fortress gate replica faces the hazy, snow-capped mountains that divide Ferghana from Tajikistan's bulk. Behind lies a plateau with detritus from construction of unclear purpose, and then, in a lonely windswept corner, a true historic artifact: ruined foundations and walls. Nothing protects them, no signs speculate as to what they might be. No guide or guard administers them. No one is present, other than a gang of boys vexing a dog lying in the grass preparing to give birth.

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The ruins are Istaravshan's **fourth secret**, a spot to pause and sketch how this city has traversed history's margins. Five centuries before the Common Era, as Persia's Darius I ruled much of the Middle East and North Africa, warring with the Greeks in the first of several conflicts pivotal to Western history, a city known as Cyropolis (for Cyrus the Great) lay on or near modern Istaravshan, in the empire's northeastern fringe. Two centuries later, Alexander “Makedonski” would cross the Oxus/Amu, defeat the Soghdians, and establish Alexandria “Eschate” (the Farthest) where Khujand now lies. First though he had to besiege and conquer the site we're now standing on, his soldiers stealing in via a water duct that flowed in the vicinity of a modern canal just below Mugh Teppa's ruins.

“AS DOZENS OF EMPIRES CONTESTED ASIA'S HEARTLAND, ISTARAVSHAN CHANGED HANDS MANY TIMES”

In the ensuing millennia, as dozens of empires contested Asia's heartland, Istaravshan changed hands many times. A Silk Road stop, it enjoyed a measure of prosperity, but its fortunes periodically waned, particularly when Genghis Khan sacked the city in the 13th century. Uzbek clans later fought over Ferghana, a conflict that, along with the transcontinental caravan trade's decline, resulted in economic devastation. In the first part of the 19th century, Istaravshan — now “Uroteppa” — suffered some 50 attacks, lost two-thirds of its population, and turned into “one of the most devastated areas of Central Asia.” Control over the city shifted back and forth among rulers seated in Bukhara and Kokand.¹

In 1864, amid a surging demand for resources spurred by both industrialization and the American Civil War (i.e., cut-off cotton supply), Russia announced its intention to colonize Central Asia. Uroteppa was reduced by siege and shells. In 1867 the Bukharan emirate ceded it, and other cities, to Russia's new “General-Governorship of Turkestan.” In the ensuing decades, Uroteppa's citizens often resisted their new overlords, rioting in 1875 and 1907.

During the Russian and then early Soviet period, unlike most areas of northern Tajikistan, Uroteppa and its surrounding district did not become a cotton-monoculture agro-industrial area, retaining instead an agriculture based on rainfed cereals, fruits, and vegetables (transported throughout the Union), and acquiring some industry, including a textile

combine. Soviet education brought opportunities. Uroteppa's notables — a **fifth secret** — included several historians, a philosopher and educator, a compiler of folklore, a satirical author, a female politician, several physicists and chemists, a seismologist, an economist, a poet who had fought the basmachi (rebels against Soviet power), a painter and woodcarver, and a ballerina who was one of the first Tajiks in the Russian ballet.² At the same time though, thousands of Uroteppans were forcibly resettled during the 1920s and 1930s as part of a plan to develop sparsely populated lands in the Vakhsh valley with migrants from the republic's overpopulated parts.

With the Soviet Union's fall, competition over power and resources among Tajikistan's kinship and solidarity networks (including one centered on Uroteppa) sparked civil war. Northerners were spared the violence raging in the south, but their alliance with the conflict's eventual victors — the Kulobis — soon soured, as men with guns dominated the government at the expense of the traditional northern ruling elite.³ By 1996, northern factions were near rebellion against the Kulobi-dominated regime. In May, following the murder of a local businessman, thousands took to the streets, including in Uroteppa. The protests lasted more than a week and remained peaceful, other than an incident in Uroteppa when police allegedly fired into a crowd, killing at least one person and wounding up to five others.⁴

“DURING THE TAJIK CIVIL WAR, NORTHERNERS WERE SPARED THE VIOLENCE RAGING IN THE SOUTH, BUT THEIR ALLIANCE WITH THE CONFLICT’S EVENTUAL VICTORS SOON SOURED AT THE EXPENSE OF THE TRADITIONAL NORTHERN RULING ELITE”

Protestors and the government reached an agreement, but President Rahmonov (now Rahmon) later allegedly directed the regional police chief to bring demonstration organizers to justice. Police searched houses, including those of Ikrom Ashurov (brother of the murdered businessman) and his family. Arrested for “banditry,” Ashurov was temporarily held in Uroteppa and “constantly beaten,” relatives said. He was transferred to Khujand's overcrowded prison, where in April 1997 inmates rioted. Government personnel, including snipers and spetsnaz [special forces], responded with what Human Rights Watch called a massacre, citing reports of between 100 and 150 killed (including Ashurov), with 200 wounded.

A failed assassination attempt on Rahmonov soon afterward prompted another wave of arrests and unexplained killings. In 1998, the brief occupation of Khujand by “renegade” colonel Mahmoud Khudoyberdiev proved to be the last spark of rebellion in the north. For Uroteppans, and all northerners, the divvying of spoils among participants in the 1997 peace accords (i.e., the regime and the United Tajik Opposition, without northern-faction representatives), along with the more proximate nuisance of Kulobi officials deployed as administrators and law enforcers, became a reality to be survived rather than reversed.

“AN ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT ON RAHMONOV PROMPTED ANOTHER WAVE OF ARRESTS AND UNEXPLAINED KILLINGS”

Despite the north's fall from power, the civil war's conclusion began a sustained economic recovery from which all regions benefited. In 2002, Istaravshan (its name restored in 2000) celebrated its 2,500th anniversary, reportedly fueled by a generous expenditure from presidential brother-in-law Hasan Asadulloev's Oriyon companies.⁵ Still, a few hold-outs bore the flame of resistance. An Istaravshani who served as deputy chair of the Taraqqiyot (Development) party, which unsuccessfully sought registration from the justice ministry for three years, led a short-lived hunger strike in 2004 and was later arrested by the State Committee on National Security (an intelligence and police agency known by the acronym GKNB, successor to the Soviet KGB).⁶ A Democratic Party branch remained active in Istaravshan (though the three-year saga of exile, abduction, and sentencing of the party's leader, Mahmadrusi Iskandarov, and a subsequent splitting into factions, sidelined the party in Tajik politics). By 2005, discontent crested. According to a local quoted in a Wikileaks cable, Istaravshanis were ready to "rise up against" Rahmonov, and regional leaders hoped to unseat him in the upcoming election.⁷

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Mainstream political activity wilted, however, as Rahmonov's regime cracked down on media, NGOs, and political parties in the wake of the 2003-2005 "color revolutions." By the 2006 election, which Rahmonov easily won, it was clear that his consolidation of power in the post-

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1997 unstable period was not merely a temporary measure in the national interest but a long-term, enduring agenda. In Istaravshan and elsewhere, any remaining expressions of discontent went underground. Around the same time, signs emerged of an Islamic revival in Tajikistan, particularly in the north. These two developments may have sowed the seeds for the conflict that lay ahead.

One Wikileaks cable, from 2009, describes an Istaravshan mosque whose Friday worshippers exceeded the space's capacity for 4,000 and flowed into the street. Government restrictions on Islam, encoded in legislation or practiced informally by police, grated on residents. Imams declared that strict enforcement of government dictates would provoke resistance.⁸ The government eventually removed recalcitrant imams from their mosques, while other Islamic leaders fell afoul of the law.⁹ When the government required mosques to re-register, a third of Istaravshan's had their applications returned due to "errors."¹⁰ In July 2010, law enforcement raided unregistered madrassas in Sughd (Tajikistan's northern oblast), including in Istaravshan, arresting mullahs in the process.¹¹

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The fuel was dry and thick, conflagration only a spark away. In late summer of 2010 it arrived. Tajikistan observers remember 23 August, whose fifth anniversary is approaching, as the day a

few dozen prisoners escaped from a GKNB detention facility, prompting a man hunt and a major security operation in the Rasht Valley. In Sughd, however, the key date is 3 September, when a car exploded in the courtyard of the police ministry's regional counter-organized crime department (RUBOP), killing three and injuring several dozen. The resulting anti-terrorism wave of arrests and trials continues to this day and has received far less international attention than the Rasht "mini-war." Istaravshan's role in the saga is its **sixth secret**.

In the months after the bombing, dozens (mostly young men in their twenties) were arrested, including relatives of Akmal Karimov, an Istaravshani. Authorities had used blood-type analysis to establish that Karimov was the car's driver—and thus Tajikistan's first suicide

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bomber. His father challenged the claim, noting that many human remains were present at the scene. He demanded a DNA test, to no avail. The government lumped 53 detainees' cases into a single trial. As the men were mostly from Istaravshan city or district, they became known as the "Istaravshan 53." Violations of criminal procedure and human rights during the nine-month investigation, documented by civil society, indicate the brutal fury with which Tajikistan's security apparatus sallied into its northern war on terror.¹²

The 53 were held incommunicado for days, weeks, or months, while their families sought information and their lawyers struggled to gain access. Many detainees, reportedly under duress, waived their right to legal representation. Others saw their lawyers only infrequently (and always in the presence of state representatives) or, in some cases, only once the trial began. Court-assigned lawyers were of dubious value; some, for example, asked that clients sign documents without reading them. Police and GKNB officers pressured detainees to sign confessions that would serve as the primary evidence in court.

"Duress" and "pressure" took the form of physical and psychological torture, allegations of which appeared in complaints lodged by all but four of the 53. As though security personnel were experimenting to improve their repertoire, the methods described run the gamut of horrors that humans inflict on one another. A selection:

**“‘DURESS’ AND
‘PRESSURE’ TOOK THE
FORM OF PHYSICAL
AND PSYCHOLOGICAL
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- removal of fingernails and beards
- beatings of hands, feet, heels, and kidneys
- application of electric shock¹³
- rape
- outdoor cold-water dousings during winter
- burning with cigarettes
- threats to rape or otherwise harm spouses and relatives
- forced viewing of the torture or humiliation of others

The trial was classed “secret” and held behind closed doors. Neither the judge nor the prosecutor’s office gave credence to the complaints of torture, concluding they were “unconfirmed.”¹⁴ Without warning, on December 23, 2011, the judge read the verdict and began the sentencing. Lawyers who learned of the proceeding were denied entry to the courthouse. Ten defendants were convicted in connection with the September 2010 bombing, the rest of membership in the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan or other illegal organizations. Five received life sentences, the others eight to 30 years each.¹⁵

The “Istaravshan 53” case was the largest trial in the bombing’s wake, and the most well documented, but only one of several dozen conducted in Sughd in the last five years. This past January, an official revealed that 270 alleged extremists had been arrested in Sughd since the bombing.¹⁶ In most cases, little is publicly known about the defendants — the trials are closed-door, locals are afraid to talk, and media, civil society, and lawyers are wary to get involved. International attention on Tajikistan focuses on the Afghanistan border and the drug trade.

“LITTLE IS PUBLICLY KNOWN ABOUT THE DEFENDANTS — THE TRIALS ARE CLOSED-DOOR, LOCALS ARE AFRAID TO TALK, AND MEDIA, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND LAWYERS ARE WARY TO GET INVOLVED”

Istaravshan, a bullseye for the crackdown, languishes in obscurity. Imagine if scores of anti-extremism arrests occurred in the fifth-largest urban areas of various Western countries: the Bay Area, Nice, Bristol, or Frankfurt. The clamor for more information — and transparent justice — would deafen. In Tajikistan, by contrast, most arrests garner cursory mentions in the press (which must tread cautiously when pursuing truth outside official sources), with group sizes or personal initials often in lieu of names. Fuller stories sometimes survive in civil society’s brave reports, but these gain little notice overseas.¹⁷

This past year, as concern grew over the recruitment of Central Asians for the war in Syria, particularly with the Islamic State’s emergence, the anti-extremism campaign in Sughd escalated. In January, RUBOP arrested six Istaravshani alleged members of Jamaat Ansarullah (JA), a Tajik terrorist group.¹⁸ A lawyer claimed RUBOP questioned the men without counsel present and forced them to confess. One man reportedly had in fact tried to

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travel to Syria, but his father persuaded him to return home. Two defendants claimed they merely collected donations to help families of men imprisoned as extremists. In April the six got prison terms of nearly a decade each, while a seventh received a year for knowing of the group’s crimes but not telling authorities.

From late September — when a UN Security Council resolution addressed the foreign terrorist fighter trend — till the end of 2014, Sughd law enforcement detained nearly 50 people for belonging to terrorist organizations and/or for “the

desire to participate” in the Syrian war.¹⁹ In November, RUBOP arrested twelve men, including an Istaravshani “emir,” on charges of involvement in JA and recruiting for the Syria conflict. (A thirteenth was arrested in Kyrgyzstan and transferred to Tajik custody.) This February, the group received sentences of 9 to 12 years each. The campaign maintained its momentum into 2015. Just this month, 23 alleged JA members, including some Istaravshanis, received long prison terms.²⁰

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Tajikistan’s security apparatus has racked up a superficially impressive record in its post-September 2010 war on terror. But is it uprooting a genuine threat, or merely lashing out at phantoms? How many of the hundreds now imprisoned had any connection with the car bomb, or with any plots (of which none have resulted in attacks) since? How many are instead paying for the crime of non-sanctioned religious belief? Or for being unable to afford a bribe when some security official needed to show results or fill a quota?

**“HOW MANY ARE
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Dome frames near an unfinished madrasa

credit: author

Apart from the haze surrounding the crackdown, the issue of radicalization remains. If it is occurring, to what extent is it the offspring of years of government repression?²¹ In Istaravshan, where Islamic revival clashed with government repression early on, symbols of the conflict appear in the old city. The Blue Dome’s state of neglect—the scattered leaves, missing books, the dust—stems from a July 2013 government directive “temporarily” suspending the madrasa’s operation, pending an education ministry permit.²² Nearby, on the same dirt-and-rock field where boys play football, derelict iron hulks intended as skeletal support for domes lie beneath a large brick building. The kids explain this was to be a madrasa, but officials stopped the project.

Most poignant, however, is another object that watches over Istaravshan. Adorning government buildings—police headquarters, the fire hall, the GKNB, neighborhood cop stations—are posters displaying a checkerboard of snapshots of nearly 100 wanted terrorists and extremists. Most are young men, their images captured in black and white, or in fuzzy color, nearly every face serious and smooth-shaven, often above a collared shirt and tie, the pictures evidently taken before their subjects transformed into bearded, anti-social radicals. Below each is biographical data in print too fine to be read by casual passersby. The poster’s implicit message is clear, though: Enemies surround you — but we know who they are.

The wanted posters are an ominous **seventh secret** of Istaravshan, a shadow colliding with the brightness of the birds peering into the same corridors where such supposed danger lurks.

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“THE IMPLICIT MESSAGE IS CLEAR: ENEMIES SURROUND YOU — BUT
WE KNOW WHO THEY ARE”



Poster with wanted terrorists and extremists

credit: author

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2. See biographies in Bashiri, I. (2002) *Prominent Tajik Figures of the Twentieth Century*. University of Minnesota Press.
3. A prominent Uroteppan in this period was Sayfiddin Turaev, a candidate in the 1991 presidential election who chaired the Congress of National Unity in 1995 and later failed to secure a spot on the 1999 presidential election ballot. His story parallels the better-known tale of Abdumalik Abdullojanov, the powerful Leninobodi who served as prime minister till his removal in 1994. From exile, Abdullojanov organized the National Revival Movement and unsuccessfully demanded a role for northerners in the peace process.
4. Discussion of events in 1996–97 draws on Human Rights Watch, ‘Leninabad: Crackdown in the North,’ April 1998, [link](#)
5. Throughout the city are sites with crumbling mosaic facades of apparent ancient vintage but with the telltale signs of “2500 COL,” “Shirkati Oriyon,” or “Orien Bank.”
6. Hall, M. (2005) ‘Tajikistan at the Crossroads of Democracy and Authoritarianism.’ In: Schlyter, B, ed., *Prospects for Democracy in Central Asia*. Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, Transactions, Vol. 15 : 31–32.
7. Wikileaks, ‘Tajikistan’s Northern Region Wants To Be Independent of Dushanbe’s Clutches,’ [link](#)
8. One imam, denied a passport due to his beard, told officials they could shave his beard “if you cut off my head.” Officials had to PhotoShop his beard out of the passport picture. Wikileaks, ‘Three Faces of Tajikistan’s Sunni Leadership,’ [link](#); Wikileaks, ‘The Sughd Region: House-to-House Searches for Islamists and Incandescent Lightbulbs [sic],’ [link](#)
9. Addressing religious leaders in July 2013, President Rahmon recited a long line of offenses ascribed to unregistered imams, including two in Istaravshon who allegedly committed “lewd acts” toward ill women seeking help. Khovar, ‘Vistupleniye E. Rahmona na vstreche s predstavatelyami obschestvennosti strani,’ 4 July 2013, [link](#)
10. Bayram, M. ‘Tajikistan: More than half of religious communities to be ‘illegal?’ Forum 18 News Service, 10 December 2009, [link](#)
11. Najibullah, M. ‘Tajik Officials Keep Sharp Eye on Islamic Teaching,’ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2 August 2010, [link](#). Some madrassas had failed re-registration due to “deficiencies discovered in their activities.” Radio Ozodi, ‘Ucheba 300 studentov sogdiiskikh medresye priostanovlena,’ 12 July 2013, [link](#). Prosecutors opened cases against parents who hindered their children from attending secondary schools, with charges that could lead to large fines or two years’ imprisonment. Bayram, M. ‘Tajikistan: ‘Your children will become extremists and terrorists,’ Forum 18 News Service, 2 September 2010, [link](#)
12. Discussion of the alleged bomber and the “Istaravshon 53” case (including details of torture) draws on NGO Coalition against Torture and Impunity, ‘NGO Report on Tajikistan’s Implementation of the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment,’ 12 October 2012; pp. 9, 11, 20, 54–58, [link](#). Mystery still shrouds the bombing’s motivation, with theories including Islamic terrorism (the official explanation), organized crime attempting to thwart a murder

investigation, an Uzbekistan-sponsored plot, and a local vendetta against RUBOP after Ismonboy Boboev's death in custody.

13. Torturers nicknamed their electric-shock instruments "Sangtuda" and "Roghun" after Tajik hydropower plants, the latter a decades-long controversial project the government has invested enormous resources in promoting.

14. A medical examination of defendants alleging torture was perfunctory (around 10 minutes) and conducted in the presence of prosecutor's office staff, without defense lawyers present. The examiners were untrained in how to detect evidence of torture. Defendants had identified specific torturers from the GKNB and interior ministry, but none were held to account.

15. Nearly a year later Tajikistan's Supreme Court ruled on an appeal, changing five sentences from life to 30 years and slightly reducing other sentences. The court paid scant attention to the torture allegations.

16. Rafieva, M. 'V Sogdye sotrudnikami militsii zaderzhani 95 chlenov ekstremistskikh partii i dvizhenii,' Asia-Plus, 12 January 2015, [link](#)

17. An Istaravshoni was arrested in November 2012 for allegedly sheltering an IMU member. The following January two men (one or both from Istaravshon) were arrested in a Matcha district operation, while an explosion in a house on Istaravshon's outskirts killed a man named Umed, said to be the son of an alleged terrorist killed in a separate shoot-out. Authorities said Umed had blown himself up to avoid arrest, and a local official "invited to the scene" by police told media he witnessed the suicide. Indicative of the pall of silence hanging over Istaravshon, details of the event became public only a week later,

despite residents having heard gunshots and the explosion. Masumi Muhammadradzhab, 'Obvinyaemi v terrorisme sovershil samopodriv,' Radio Ozodi, 26 January 2013, [link](#)

18. JA, which emerged when an online video announced the group's responsibility for the 2010 bombing, remains poorly understood, despite Tajikistan's many trials of alleged members. It may have had a small presence in Pakistan's tribal areas, later expanding to northern Afghanistan.

19. Radio Ozodi, 'Chto tolkaet Sogdiiskuyu molodyozh v obyatiya ekstremistskikh partii i dvizhenii?' 31 December 2014, [link](#)

20. Radio Ozodi, '184 goda tyurmi dlya 23 chlenov 'Anzorullo' v Sogdye,' 5 May 2015, [link](#)

21. Such linkage remains speculation in the absence of hard data, but some evidence comes from an Istaravshon focus group interviewed by OSCE-sponsored surveyors in November 2010, amid the Rasht operation and Sughd arrests. The group claimed government policies toward Islam, along with corruption and abuse of power, were a primary cause of radicalization. They insisted, though, that extremism would find little support in Istaravshon, given local culture and religious practices. Taarnby, M. (2012). 'Islamist Radicalization in Tajikistan: An Assessment of Current Trends,' Center for Socio-Political Studies Korshinos: 44, 61. [Link to press release](#)

22. Rafieva, M, 'Deyatelnost vsekh medresye v Sogdye vremenno priostanovlena,' Asia-Plus, 12 July 13,8:09, [link](#). In recent years the school reportedly had 100 students, who studied not only theology but subjects such as English and computer skills. Robert Middleton and Huw Thomas, *Tajikistan and the High Pamirs*, Odyssey Illustrated Guides, 2nd ed., 2011, p. 170.