Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan: A Brief History of Transformation and Migration

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Introduction

The withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan in 2014 is likely to impact the security of regional states in complex ways. Most analysts agree that during the last twelve years the presence of western military forces has acted as a counterweight to the threat posed by militant and terrorist organizations to the security of South Central Asian states. Both regional states and international stakeholders still routinely identify these organizations as a primary threat to regional stability. In the context of Pakistan, the issue of trans-border militant organizations assumes greater complexity. Terrorist attacks within Pakistan have not only impacted the domestic security environment, but they have also severely affected economic growth. Along with a spectrum of domestic militant groups engaged in fighting the Pakistani state are an unknown number of foreign militant groups which have recently launched high profile attacks in Pakistan.

In the aftermath of the devastating terrorist attack on Karachi airport on June 8 2014[1], videos soon emerged on Jihadi websites showing 10 members of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)[2], clad in identical green shalwar kameez and white trainers, preparing for the operation. The attack not only refocused attention on the activities of the Central Asian group in Pakistan but also become a spark to kick start the long delayed military operation in North Waziristan. Unconfirmed reports suggest out of 400 militants, killed so far during Operation Zarb-e-Azb, a 100 were central Asian militants associated with IMU.

Despite the fact that some of the Central Asian militants had moved in to FATA in the 1990s, their approximate numbers, organizational set up and aims still remain shrouded in mystery and subject of speculation. We still do not know how small trans-border local actors, such as IMU, transform and evolve into regionally networked terrorist groups. A brief look back at the story of the IMU at this point is

important to understand the dynamics of trans-border actors and their relationship to the politics of border spaces.

Emergence of IMU and Post- Independence Uzbekistan

The IMU evolved from a small-scale, local vigilante-style Adolat (justice) movement in Uzbekistan, in the city of Namangan, Fergana valley, in 1992.[3] The group emerged against the backdrop of the chaos that marked the early years of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It was a period of extreme uncertainty and upheaval.[4] In the early 90's, when the Adolat movement emerged, it was one of several new political platforms formed by diverse groups to challenge the old communist party guard. Empirical accounts suggest that it was not the primary challenge facing President Islam Karimov's regime as it grappled with post-independence chaos in Uzbekistan. His main challengers were the Tashkent-centered Birlik party and its splinter Erk, led by Abdurahim Pulatov, who contested the first presidential elections against Islam Karimov.[5] At the time both Birlik and Erk had significant following among the urban elite as well as intellectuals and students, and were a cause of greater concern for Islam Karimov and other ex-communist elites. By 1993 all three parties including Adolat had been banned, their members detained, and their leadership forced into exile.[6]

Escaping the Uzbek State's crackdown, Tahir Youdashev, leader of the Adolat, and his deputy, Juma Boi Namangani, both sought refuge in Tajikistan.[7] Over the years, whereas, Uzbek state's extreme and repressive practices against all political dissent—both Islamic and secular—led to the disintegration of the more urban-based Birlik and Erk, the geospatial relocation of Adolat, helped the movement to survive and to sustain and transform its agenda. The trans-border migration of the 'Adolat leaders with their small group of followers into Tajikistan was the first step towards the evolution of the later day IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan).[8] The scaling up of the IMU's jihad agenda followed each stage in the spatial migration of the group from invoking Islamic practices and social ideas to remedy the chaos in Fergana. Displacement to Tajikistan immediately led to a widening of its jihad agenda. Adolat leaders were quick in taking up the side of the Tajik Islamists against the ex-communists in the Tajik Civil War.[9]

Repressive use of force and coercion by the Uzbek state also meant that Adolat members moved along with their families, if possible, or their families followed

soon after. Family members who were left behind faced detention, arrest, and torture.[10] Some reports suggest that three of Yuldashev's brothers were arrested and spent time in Uzbek jails, which are notorious for human rights violations, including torture. According to some sources when Namangani arrived in Kurgan-Tyube, Tajikistan in 1992, his entourage included only thirty Uzbeks and some Arabs who had served as emissaries to Adolat from Saudi Islamic charities (Saudi Arabia contained a large Uzbek diaspora, whose ancestors had fled during the 1918-1928 Basmachi Revolt).[11]

IMU and the Borders in South Central Asia

Subsequent migrations across multiple borders not only expanded the IMU's political agenda, but also transformed the group as it negotiated space in new environments and faced new political and economic realities. The group's composition also changed with spatial relocation which also added new elements to the group's agenda. Such relocations also meant that leaders and members were forced to search for new economic resources to sustain the group.[12] In Tajikistan, from a small group of close members Namangani went on to form a substantial personal military force, composed mostly of Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Chechens, but also of Arabs. Many of the men were accompanied by their families, and survival of the group in rural Tajikistan in the midst of a civil war necessitated finding new ways of adjusting to the political economy of the area. Tajikistan lies on a major drug trafficking route, for Afghan opiates, to the European and Russian markets. Namangani and his group soon involved themselves in the Tajik drug trade.[13] He soon appeared to have become heavily involved in the transportation of heroin from Afghanistan to Tajikistan and onwards to Russia and Europe, at times travelling to Afghanistan himself.[14] Reports suggest that despite the deaths of Namangani and Yuldashev long ago, the IMU cadre remain an important chain link in narcotic trafficking routes, connecting Northern Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and the enclaves in the Fergana valley.

More importantly, Yuldashev's move to Afghanistan with other leaders of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) enabled him to launch a wider political and financial campaign to raise funds for the group.[15] When the civil war turned against the IRPT, Yuldashev joined the other key IRPT leaders in exile in Afghanistan. This further expanded the exiled Uzbek group's network of alliances and consequently led to the broadening of their political agenda. His campaign to

raise finances for the expanding group brought him in contact with the Afghans, Arabs and other radical groups as well as their international financiers present in the region, immediately after the end of the Soviet War.[16] According to various sources, he travelled to Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and later to Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and perhaps the Caucasus as well, in order to make contacts with Uzbek diaspora members in these countries.[17] His travels seem to have expanded his links to the intelligence services in these countries and possibly allowed him to access their covert funds. His relationship with Pakistan's Inter-services Intelligence Agency (ISI) is of particular interest here. According to sources, he was based outside Peshawar, Pakistan from 1995 to 1998 where he operated out of the Center of the Afghan Arabs.[18] Many of the same Arabs went on to form the core of Al Qaeda at the end of the 1990s. Yuldashev also received funds from various Islamic charities and, according to Russian and Uzbekistani officials, from the intelligence services of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey. The IMU's relationship with the Pakistani state security services was to change significantly in later years due to developments related to the US-led wars against Al Qaeda and War in Afghanistan. The changing nature of wars and geopolitical conflicts in the region has had a profound impact on IMU's goals and structure, and increased its incentives to wage 'jihad'.

The UN-negotiated end of the Tajik Civil War threatened the sanctuary and operational space of the Uzbek militants and their dependents which they utilized thus far. When most Tajik Islamic groups, organized under the umbrella of UTO (United Tajik Opposition), signed the peace deal with ex-communists to share power, it isolated Namangani and his followers.[19] By this time, the group included Uzbeks, Tajiks, Chechens, and Uighurs based primarily in valleys around Central Tajikistan. It is at this point in time that Yuldashev, along with Namangani, decided to re-launch the group as the IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) with its stated goal—as posted on the Internet in August 1999—as the "establishment of an Islamic state with the application of the Sharia" in Uzbekistan.[20] Finally, almost 6 years after the small Adolat group moved out of Namangan, the IMU emerged as its new avatar, with a broader regional profile and agenda.

IMU's emergence coincided with the move of both Namangani and Yuldashev into Afghanistan. As the group was no longer welcome in post-civil war Tajikistan, the Afghan Taliban agreed to provide them a sanctuary and a base in Afghanistan. With their goals still focused on Uzbekistan, in 1999, the IMU launched armed

incursions into Uzbekistan from the Batken enclave in the Kyrgyz part of the Fergana.[21] For the next year or so they continued to make forays into Fergana valley using routes out of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, attacking Uzbek border guards and taking some Japanese and Americans as hostages.[22] By 2001 the IMU incursions started to abate without any lasting impact on the Uzbek state's control of the Fergana valley. On the contrary, IMU incursions were used by the Uzbek state to enhance its security presence in the conflicted border zones.[23] These incursions also allowed Islam Karimov's government to increase Uzbek engagement with the US and other western states, which were by now becoming increasingly focused on the global threat of terrorism.[24]

Links with Other Militant Groups and Expanding Regional Agenda

When US military attacks against the Taliban-led government in Afghanistan began in 2001, the IMU fought on the Northern Front in Kunduz under the Al Qaeda-led 555 Brigade, which was commanded by Juma Namangani.[25] After the fall of the Taliban in November 2001 members of the IMU found refuge in the South Waziristan Agency, territory of the Mehsud tribe in the Pakistani FATA.[26] Up to this point, the rhetoric on IMU's websites still remained focused on Central Asian governments. Some messages appeared to be more in line with the objectives of other Afghanistan and Pakistan-based groups that IMU was coming into contact with. It is important to note that Yuldashev's and IMU's online messages started to directly attack the US only after the group moved into Pakistani tribal regions.[27]

In 2002, the IMU split into the IJU (Islamic Jihad Union), a group that has acted as Al Qaeda's recruitment and outreach wing to Europeans of Turkish descent.[28] Western European Muslims have also been trained by the IMU in camps in North Waziristan, Pakistan. German nationals of Turkish and Moroccan origin, who were trained in IMU and IJU camps, have made threats against Germany. In September 2009, Pakistani investigators discovered a 'village' of German insurgents, including Muslim converts, who were being trained in a camp controlled by the IMU in the Waziristan area of Pakistan.[29] A number of Swedish converts were also present at the camp.

In 2007, Pakistan's military, under pressure from the US and other Western partners, launched a military operation, with support from tribal forces under Maulvi Nazir, to evict the IMU from North Waziristan.[30] The Pakistani state's

changing approaches and security perceptions regarding its own border spaces have had a profound impact on the changes that IMU as an organization has undergone. IMU's original leaders, Yuldashev and Namangani, both had very clear goals, one of which was establishing an Islamic caliphate in the Fergana valley. After shifting into Pakistan's tribal belt, much of the group's energy seemed to have been focused on surviving in an increasingly hostile environment, as the Pakistani state's perception of the IMU changed. Yuldashev had to postpone his agenda of jihad in Central Asia as he and the IMU became more involved with local militant dynamics in FATA, including the Pakistani state's complex relations with some of these local militant groups. The IMU became closely associated with Baitullah Mehsud, the leader of the Mehsud tribal militants and IMU's main host in FATA.[31] Baitullah Mehsud, leading a group of militants based in South Waziristan, became increasingly hostile towards the Pakistani military. In 2007, he launched the umbrella militant organization Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP), which has waged a war against the Pakistani state and military; the IMU has since become increasingly linked with the TTP.[32]

Conclusion

In short, IMU's geo-spatial journey has not only influenced its agenda and scaled up its goals, but it has also changed the very nature of the organization itself. After the death of Namangani in 2001 and Yuldashev in 2009, IMU seems to have lost its original focus on Central Asia. The list of martyrs the organization, usually posts up on its websites, includes fewer and fewer names of fighters of Central Asian origin.[33] The IMU of today appears to be made up mostly of members from Northern Afghanistan and to be working in partnership with other local militant groups such as the Uighurs from the Chinese province of Xinxiang and some Chechens from the Caucasus. Finally, IMU's lack of clear end-goals makes it difficult to distinguish it from other militant groups operating in Afghanistan or Pakistan, particularly when the remnants of the IMU rely on local actors to stay operational. Within their southern zone of operation around Pak-Afghan border spaces, they operate closely with groups allied with the Pakistani Taliban, which are fighting the Pakistani military forces in FATA.[34] Past few years' intelligence reports suggest that the IMU cadre has also served as a bridgehead for the Taliban in helping them expand influence in the Northern zone of operation around the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border and in the Afghan border provinces of Kunduz and Baghlan.[35] Within their southern zone of operation around Pak-Afghan border spaces, they

operate closely with groups allied with the Pakistani Taliban, which are fighting the Pakistani military forces in FATA. Some unconfirmed reports are suggesting that since the Zarb-e-Azb operation began in NWA, some of the IMU cadre is trying to find sanctuary with some Pakistani sectarian groups and Taliban in parts of Balochistan.

The fact is that people in the region have moved around these borders for centuries. Even today the same border spaces which remain sanctuaries of militant groups such as IMU, are the routes for illicit economic migrations and human trafficking from South Central Asia to Europe. The security dynamic of the war on terror unleashed in the region during last 15 years has obscured these lines that separate militant actors and other trans-border migrants. Corralling all non-local actors such as central Asians in FATA and their extended families as legitimate targets for detention and extermination or extradition means that unlike local militants these actors have no political options and are likely to fight to the end.

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Endnotes

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