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Countering the IMU in Afghanistan

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Foreign Fighters (FF) have always played a significant role in the conflicts in Afghanistan. Whether it was the large numbers of Arabs, Central Asians, and others who swelled the ranks of the *mujahidin* during the Soviet invasion or the al-Qa'ida and other Islamist fighters who buttressed the Taliban's forces during the late 1990s and the past decade, well-equipped and motivated FF groups have provided a manifest benefit to their allies. Outside of al-Qa'ida itself, one of the most numerous and active FF groups operating in Afghanistan is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Though its members and operations are focused in only a handful of districts in Afghanistan, the IMU's disciplined fighters form an elite training cadre acting as a true combat multiplier for the Afghan Taliban, and thus its influence is felt exponentially across much of the country's south. In places like the Deh Chopan district of Zabul province, the IMU is a critical piece of the local insurgency. However, the past year has dealt a series of setbacks to the group: from the possible death of their leader, Tahir Yuldashev¹, to the large-scale Pakistani Military operations directed against their safe havens in Waziristan. Deprived of leadership and under pressure in Pakistan, the IMU is now at a crossroads regarding its future in the Afghan conflict. This article will briefly examine the history of the IMU in southern Afghanistan; their importance to the Taliban insurgency, and examine how to best counter the group's dangerous influence in light of General McChrystal's population-centric focus and the addition of 30,000 new U.S. soldiers to the country.

The IMU has its origins in the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. The victory of the *mujahidin* and the collapse of Communism formed a nexus of burgeoning Islamism across Central Asia. It was in the volatile Fergana Valley at the crux of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, where a young mullah named Tahir Yuldashev and a former Soviet paratrooper with the *nom du guerre* 'Juma Namangani' first began to organize an Islamist movement against the autocratic Uzbek government of Islam Karimov. When the government cracked down on their movement in 1992, Yuldashev and Namangani fled to neighboring Tajikistan. Following that country's descent into civil war a short time later, they again fled – this time to Afghanistan. It was during this period that the rebel Uzbek movement grew closer to the Taliban and al-Qa'ida, and took on its current character.²

¹ "Tahir Yuldashev Killed in Aug 27 Drone Attack," *Daily Times of Pakistan*, October 2, 2009. Some Taliban figures have since corroborated the reports of Yuldashev's demise, but his final status remains uncertain. See "Taliban Confirm Uzbek Commander's Death in Drone Attack," *The International News of Pakistan*, October 5, 2009.

² Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (Yale University Press, 2002)

The collapse of their Taliban patrons in 2001 meant upheaval for the IMU as well. Namangani died in a U.S. airstrike in Kunduz, and Yuldashev bolted for the border regions of Pakistan along with the remainder of his organization.³ But the IMU discovered a second wind in exile. According to Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid, the number of IMU fighters in the border regions of Pakistan had swelled to between three thousand and four thousand by 2008.⁴ The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan was no longer exclusively Uzbek – the group was host to *takfiri* militants from across the Central Asian States and the Caucasus, including Tajiks, Turkmen, Chechens, and Uighurs⁵. Amongst the rural villagers of Afghanistan and Pakistan – many of whom had never been more than fifty miles from their birthplace – the ethnicities of these foreign fighters were often confused and the term ‘Uzbek’ used to refer to any foreign fighter who didn’t speak Pashtu.⁶ But while the IMU’s chief refuge was in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), they also sought out safe havens within Afghanistan.

The district of Deh Chopan in the far north of Zabul province was one of the first locations where the Taliban returned following their initial expulsion⁷, and it later became a refuge for their Uzbek allies. The region’s precipitous mountain valleys keep it isolated from the outside while its location at the crux of Zabul, Uruzgan, and Kandahar provinces makes it an ideal staging ground for insurgent movements. The district itself is sparsely populated, but from here insurgents can transit with relative ease to the Marah or Hazarabuz valleys and then continue north into Uruzgan or south to join the course of the Arghandab River into Kandahar province. It was this combination of secluded mountain safe haven and ready access to the battlegrounds of RC-South that made Deh Chopan attractive to Yuldashev and the IMU.

When the first IMU members arrived in Deh Chopan is unclear, but the largest migration occurred in the latter half of 2007. The IMU became embroiled in a tribal conflict between competing Pakistani Taliban leaders in Waziristan, and when the group was implicated in the death of a well-respected Saudi Shaykh, violence broke out between the Uzbeks and their erstwhile hosts. One of the Taliban leaders in Waziristan, the pro-government Maulvi Nazir, ordered the groups expulsion from Wana and neighboring areas under the control of his Ahmadzai Waziri tribesmen.⁸ Large numbers of IMU fighters re-located to other districts in the FATA, while a smaller number – likely at the invitation of the Afghan Taliban – headed to Deh Chopan.⁹ Tahir Yuldashev was reportedly a friend of the senior Taliban leader in the district, Mullah Qahar. The first indication of their arrival came in the fall of 2007, when Afghan elders in Deh Chopan approached Coalition Forces (CF), concerned over the growing number of Uzbek fighters resettling in the area along with their families.¹⁰ Over the ensuing seasons, multiple

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ahmed Rashid, *Descent Into Chaos* (Penguin Books, 2008)

⁵ “The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan: A Resurgent IMU?” by Igor Rota in the Jamestown Foundation *Terrorism Monitor*, December 17, 2003.

⁶ Conversations with USSF Soldiers.

⁷ Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (Columbia University Press, 2008)

⁸ “The Game is Up for Uzbeks,” *Dawn*, April 5, 2007.

⁹ When Maulvi Nazir expelled the Uzbeks from his territory, they were quickly welcomed by Baitullah Mehsud and his faction of the Pakistani Taliban. See “Wazir Tribes Ratify New Militant Bloc” in the *Daily Times of Pakistan*, July 8, 2008.

¹⁰ It’s arguable whether the term ‘Foreign Fighter’ accurately describes the nature of IMU fighters in Northern Zabul, since they have now been living there with their families for several years. Reporting from Local Nationals,

Coalition reports warned that the organization was establishing training camps and bringing additional fighters into the area.

It is difficult to understate the IMU's importance to the local insurgency in Deh Chopan. IMU fighters are invariably more disciplined, motivated, and experienced than their Afghan counterparts. The IMU embraces a *takfiri* ideology dedicated to the overthrow of the secular Central Asian regimes and their replacement by an Islamic Caliphate. Like their al-Qa'ida allies, IMU militants see themselves as footsoldiers in a global jihad.¹¹ Also like al-Qa'ida, the IMU has access to a deep reserve of funding from patrons across the Islamic world, enabling them to outfit their members with superior weaponry and tactical equipment. This allows the IMU to fill a natural role as trainers and advisors for the Afghan insurgency.

In Deh Chopan, CF operations have revealed just how much of a combat multiplier the IMU provides. In late May 2009, a combined patrol of U.S. Special Forces (USSF) and International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) Soldiers fought a pitched engagement with enemy militants in the Larzab Bowl, a secluded valley in the far north of Deh Chopan. According to after-action reports, the black-clad fighters wore body armor, Kevlar helmets, and military-issue boots. They fired and maneuvered tactically, used smoke to mask their movement, and stood their ground even when attack helicopters arrived on the scene.¹² When USSF and ISAF returned to the Larzab Bowl a month later in greater numbers, the enemy was not as keen to engage, but still demonstrated their tactical proficiency: conducting reconnaissance by fire and probing simultaneously at multiple different locations in the CF perimeter. Like the earlier engagement in May, local national interpreters also reported that the enemy fighters were speaking in Farsi and Russian over their radios.¹³ During the latter incident, villagers also reported the enemy were wearing ACUs and using rifles with advanced optics similar to those on the weapons of U.S. Soldiers. On nearly every occasion when CF has moved with any strength to disrupt the supply lines or safe haven within Deh Chopan, the enemy has responded with significant force, proving themselves a disciplined and well-armed foe.¹⁴ According to U.S. Special Forces Soldiers, these combatants display a degree of training and tactical proficiency far above the average Taliban foot soldier.¹⁵

The above incidents confirmed the presence of a formidable Foreign Fighter group in Deh Chopan, and also illustrated their importance to the local Taliban. The IMU provides Taliban Commanders with a ready cadre of experienced fighters who can train their local recruits in

however, still continues to show a pronounced division between the area's historic residents and the recent immigrants.

¹¹ For a more detailed exposition on the changes within the Uzbek militant movement since 2001, see "The Evolving Role of Uzbek-led Fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan" by Jeremy Binnie and Joanna Wright in the *CTC Sentinel*, August 2009.

¹² Conversations with USSF Soldiers. See also "Equipment, skill of Afghan insurgents improve," by Sean Naylor in the *Army Times*, June 4, 2009.

¹³ Conversations with USSF Soldiers. Due to the IMU's nature as the predominant Islamic militant group in Central Asia, its ranks are not limited to Uzbeks. To avoid language boundaries, the Movement's members use Russian, a *lingua franca* for those raised in the former Soviet Republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

¹⁴ Run-ins with trained and well-armed bands of militants in Deh Chopan date back to 2003. For a detailed account of one such event – a running fight lasting over 50 hours – see "The Battle of Mari Ghar" by Sean Naylor in the *Army Times*, June 26, 2006.

¹⁵ Conversations with USSF Soldiers.

battlefield tactics and the use of advanced weaponry. In combat with CF, these Foreign Fighters assume the role of combat advisers whose fortitude inspires the men around them and whose leadership creates a far more effective military force.

Conversely, for the IMU, the far reaches of Northern Zabul provide them with a stable, relatively secure base of operations and a refuge to escape pressure elsewhere. Zabul lies in relative proximity to Waziristan, where large numbers of IMU fighters still reside. There's likely a pronounced symmetry between the populations of IMU members in the two regions – as Pakistani Military operations increase in Waziristan; the Uzbeks seek refuge in Northern Zabul and *vice-versa*.

As mentioned earlier, the Northern Zabul districts are also geographically advantageous to the foreign fighters. Their safe haven in Deh Chopan allows them to influence events throughout RC-South. During the poppy season in Helmand, local militants travelled from Deh Chopan to help with the harvest. Though its own harvest occurs later than Helmand due to the difference in elevation, Northern Zabul has its own poppy crops, and USSF operations have shown that many of the same logistical supply lines for enemy fighters and equipment also serve as narcotics trafficking routes.¹⁶

Secure safe haven and ideally-situated staging area: these factors make the Northern Zabul districts particularly attractive for the IMU and other FF. But this is not to say that the relationship between the foreigners and their local patrons is entirely symbiotic.

Though the local insurgents (the bulk of which are likely not ideological Taliban) benefit from the training and resources the Uzbeks and their lot bring with them, their guests exact a heavy price for their assistance. Debriefs from U.S. Soldiers indicate that when Foreign Fighters move through villages in the Larzab area, they instruct the locals to divert their eyes and keep their heads down. They quarter in their own camps or in the homes of their militant allies, and rarely interact with the locals. This aloofness does not prevent them from making other peremptory demands on the population: the tithing of food and other supplies in return for their ostensible protection.¹⁷

They are able to behave in such domineering fashion due to the lack of any viable competition for the local population's allegiance. Deh Chopan and the neighboring Khak-i-Afghan district are absent any real presence from the Afghan government. There once were Afghan National Police (ANP) forces in Deh Chopan, but they dissolved in 2003 under pressure from a resurgent Taliban.¹⁸ Though there are a handful of CF Firebases scattered throughout the Northern Zabul area, the forces that man them are not numerous enough to control more than a few kilometers outside their perimeters. And if the overall situation in Afghanistan continues to develop as it has for the past six months, those scarce U.S. and ISAF soldiers may become increasingly scarcer.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Giustozzi.

Under the Counterinsurgency strategy associated with General McChrystal, traditional maneuver units would be deployed to more populated areas and oriented towards securing the Afghan people rather than hunting the Taliban. Across the South, the cities of Kandahar and Lashkar Gah, and the districts of Central Helmand would see a surge in U.S. and NATO forces as they focus more on clearing, holding, and building terrain rather than intermittent sweeping operations or the episodic raid, when Coalition Forces would move into an area, find and combat the enemy (with varying degrees of success), and then leave shortly after. General McChrystal and his advisors believe that this population-centric strategy is the key for success in Afghanistan, but how do the Northern Zabul districts and their considerable Foreign Fighter presence fit into this new paradigm?

At first glance, it would appear that any strategy focused exclusively on populated areas must by its nature exclude remote, uninhabited areas. And outside of the provincial capital of Qalat, Zabul province as a whole is bereft of any major urban centers. But CF should not lose sight of the importance that the Northern Zabul safe havens play to the overall insurgency. As additional U.S. and NATO forces pour into Afghanistan in an effort to secure the larger population centers, the Taliban focus will also shift. The enemy will 'surge' its own forces from those rural areas already under its control into the cities and neighboring villages. This will not be a rehash of 2006, when massed Taliban columns attempted to seize the areas around Kandahar through open warfare. Instead the insurgents will resort to large-scale asymmetric warfare: suicide bombings, assassinations of government officials, night letters. Their aim will be to destroy whatever perception of security exists within the populated areas to such a degree that the newly arriving Coalition Forces will find their mission unsalvageable. Thus, even as the Coalition shifts its operational focus to population security, it must simultaneously retain the flexibility to strike against enemy staging areas and prevent the influx of insurgents and weapons into the cities.

Northern Zabul is, and will continue to be one of these staging grounds. If CF can act to deny the Taliban and their foreign allies the use of their training camps and interdict the flow of fighters and equipment, they will make it progressively harder for the enemy to sustain their campaign of discord within the cities. But CF do not currently have the military personnel to effectively control Northern Zabul. Even if they did, the nature of the terrain and lack of infrastructure would make this an unfeasible task. This mission is not one for conventional military forces, who lack the mobility and flexibility to operate effectively in these areas, but is precisely the kind of economy-of-force mission particularly suited to U.S. Special Forces.

The 2007 "Surge" in Iraq involved a similar approach. While the bulk of additional combat forces and certainly much of the press was devoted to the urban districts of Baghdad, additional troops were also sent to Baghdad's immediate environs: the logistical safe havens and staging grounds for the "accelerants" fueling violence within the city. It was a combination of increased population security in Baghdad proper and deliberate, targeted offensive operations in the surroundings that eventually proved successful. The increased presence of U.S., Iraqi, and 'Sons of Iraq' forces on the streets and in the neighborhoods deprived al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) of their freedom of maneuver and made it more difficult to reach many of their targets, while the clearance operations and effective patrolling in the rural Baghdad belts denied them their access to their caches of arms and explosives.

How would a similar strategy, executed in Afghanistan, look in the Northern Zabul province? Without access to large numbers of soldiers and resources, USSF and ISAF must work together to coordinate operations and effects by selectively focusing on the handful of areas that form the key links in the enemy's supply lines. Continuous patrolling by USSF and partnered Afghan government and local defense forces will go a long way to denying the enemy the ability to transit fighters and weapons with relative impunity. Selective, targeted raids based on the information gleaned from those patrols will compel insurgent leaders and facilitators to maintain a low profile. Ideally these operations would occur prior to the summer fighting season, forcing the insurgents to keep extra manpower to defend their safe havens and creating 'breathing space' for those forces in more populated areas (Kandahar, Tarin Kowt, and Qalat) conducting 'hold and build' counterinsurgency missions.

They should also look to widen the rift between local fighters and their foreign cadre. As described above, the Foreign Fighters take a heavy-handed approach to the locals within Deh Chopan. And historical reporting would also suggest that Tahir Yuldashev and his group are not the most gracious of guests.¹⁹ IMU members are dogmatists; strict adherents to global *jihad* who have little regard for the plight of the ordinary Pashtun villager. Even in a historically Taliban-dominated area such as Deh Chopan most residents are not die-hard Deobandis, but are more concerned purely with stability and the protection of their families and livelihoods. Operations in the area must therefore be carefully directed against FF camps and personnel, and CF must promulgate the message that if the Uzbeks simply left or surrendered, the area would be spared further violence.

In the end, the Northern Zabul districts cannot be the priority for the CF effort in Afghanistan. The sheer geographic limitations and sparse population make the area ill-suited for traditional counterinsurgency. But at the same time CF cannot neglect the region and let the IMU and its disciplined and well-armed core of fighters project their influence across RC-South unimpeded. Instead, CF must synchronize operations in population centers and enemy staging areas, and USSF or other SOF must retain the ability to conduct offensive operations at the right locations and right times within the Northern Zabul districts. By doing so, they can impose enough pressure on the Foreign Fighter groups to prevent them from spreading further into the populated areas of Kandahar, Uruzgan, and Zabul, and thereby make the campaigns to secure that terrain far easier.

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¹⁹ For insight on Yuldashev's lukewarm reputation with his erstwhile hosts, see "The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Undergoing Dangerous Transformation" by Deirdre Tynan on Eurasia.net, October 20, 2009. Yuldashev and his Uzbeks are notable for being forcibly evicted by a Pashtun culture famous for their hospitality.

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