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Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and the Changing Face of Uzbek Militancy

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Although Uzbek militants have been active in Afghanistan and Pakistan since the late 1990s, little attention has been paid to these fighters. Principally, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan—formed in 1998 by Toher Yuldashev and Juma Namangani—is the main organization which organizes and directs these militants. The group's main focus has always been ousting Uzbek President Islam Karimov in favor of installing an Islamist regime. Over the past several years however, the IMU has strengthened its ties with the likes of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, focusing not just on northern Afghanistan but internationally as well—a particularly troubling development that has managed to fly under the radar.

The IMU has maintained close ties with the Taliban and al-Qaeda since the late 1990s, meeting with Taliban officials and Osama bin Laden in 1997 and later, agreeing to set up a base of operations in northern Afghanistan while Yuldashev resided in Kandahar with Taliban senior leadership in 1998. In exchange for using northern Afghanistan as a launching pad into the central Asian states, the IMU provided militants to the Taliban to battle the Northern Alliance, led by Ahmed Shah Massoud. In 2000, the group was designated as a terrorist organization by the United States, who noted the group's close association with al-Qaeda. After fighting losing battles with invading U.S. forces in the north and east in 2001, the IMU relocated to South Waziristan in Pakistan where it reconstituted, partially shifting its focus to assist a clan of Waziri tribal militants in fighting against the Pakistani government.

Unfortunately for the IMU, the rest of the Waziri tribe did not take favorably to IMU involvement in the fighting and expelled the Uzbek militants. The IMU then found an ally in Baitullah Mehsud, an influential Mehsud tribal leader who formed the Pakistan Taliban (Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan or TTP) in December 2007. Baitullah and the TTP provided sanctuary for the IMU in exchange for their assistance resourcing the fight against Pakistani security forces—Baitullah and Yuldashev appeared to be particularly close. This sanctuary, however, was short lived. Pakistani military operations in South Waziristan throughout 2009 forced the IMU out of the region, and resulted in Yuldashev's death in August 2009. Thus began the IMU's migration to North Waziristan where it, once again, found new allies, including al-Qaeda.

The IMU's migration to North Waziristan, a melting pot of national and transnational terrorist groups, is contemporaneous with the groups partnering with al-Qaeda and likely the main catalyst for the group's increasingly internationalist agenda. Although the IMU maintained ties with al-Qaeda since the late 1990s, the death of Yuldashev and the leadership vacuum that

ensued would have provided space for al-Qaeda to exploit. In North Waziristan, the Haqqani Network reigns supreme and provides national and transnational terrorists—including the IMU, al-Qaeda, and many others—with the sanctuary they need to train, plan, and resource their operations.

In early 2009, it was revealed that German jihadists were training in IMU camps in North Waziristan and were part of an al-Qaeda plot to attack civilian targets in Germany in the style of the 2008 Mumbai attacks. These five German IMU members, known as the “Hamburg Group” were directed by al-Qaeda, allegedly by Osama bin Laden himself, to launch such attacks in the early summer of 2010. Yet, before any operation was launched, drone strikes killed two members of the group, while two others were arrested. Although this attack was prevented, the IMU has been implicated in additional al-Qaeda plots to target government buildings, tourist sites, and transportation infrastructure in the UK and France.

In addition to their broader internationalist agenda, the IMU is also keen to return to their roots as an anti-Karimov movement aimed at establishing Islamist regime in Uzbekistan. Since at least 2007, the IMU reconstituted their positions in the northern Afghanistan provinces of Kunduz, Takhar and to a lesser extent, Baghlan. Over the past several years, a tri-partite insurgency appears to have formed in the north, including the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and IMU operatives. IMU figures have been integrated into the Taliban’s shadow governance structures—helping the Taliban extend their influence into Uzbek populations where their influence has historically been limited. In all, nine known Special Forces operations in the north have targeted mid-to senior level insurgents with ties to all three groups since the late-summer of 2010.

The insurgency in northern Afghanistan is by no means burgeoning out of control. The Taliban, with the help of the IMU and al-Qaeda have limited operational capacity. Far more concerning than these groups’ expanded operations in the north is al-Qaeda’s ability to orient the IMU on internationally focused terrorist operations, something that al-Qaeda has successfully helped achieve with such organizations as Lashkar-e Taiba and the TTP.

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