The Evolving Role of Uzbek-led Fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan

By Jeremy Binnie and Joanna Wright

UZBEK-LED JIHADIST GROUPS have become important actors in the Afghanistan and Pakistan insurgencies. The Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) is increasingly involved in attacks in Afghanistan, likely coordinated with the Haqqani network. The IJU releases regular propaganda statements and videos encouraging Central Asians and Turks to join the fighting. While the IJU's one European terrorist plot in September 2007 may prove to be an anomaly, it is actively trying to reestablish itself in Central Asia. Moreover, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), another Uzbek-led terrorist group, is following the IJU's lead and is now releasing its own propaganda and video statements encouraging Muslims to join the fighting in South Asia. Whereas the IJU is more focused on Afghanistan, the IMU has concentrated its attacks on Pakistan's security forces, likely coordinated with Baitullah Mehsud's militant faction.

The Uzbek-led jihadist groups are useful allies for the Taliban. Many fighters are experienced combat veterans, and newer recruits will also likely have some prior training as conscripts in the Uzbek or other Central Asian militaries. The Uzbek-led fighters have little choice but to remain loyal to their hosts, making them more reliable allies than local tribal groupings.

This article will examine the emergence of the IJU and its escalating activities in Afghanistan, the role that the two Uzbek-led groups play in supporting the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban and evidence that al-Qa`ida has facilitated this process.

The IJU Emerges

The IJU splintered from the IMU in 2002 under the leadership of Najmiddin Jalolov (also known as Abu Yahya Muhammad Fatih).[1] It is speculated that the two groups broke apart because the IJU's Jalolov fell out with IMU leader Tahir Yuldashev (also known as Muhammad Tahir Farooq) over ideological issues after the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Yuldashev wanted to transform the IMU into a regional organization, changing its name to the Islamic Movement of Turkistan, while Jalolov remained focused on conducting attacks in Uzbekistan.[2] Jalolov's group remained unknown until it claimed responsibility for suicide bombings in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in March and July 2004.[3] Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov also mentioned his name in connection with the unrest in the country's Andijan Province in May 2005.[4]

Despite this early domestic focus, the IJU has since eclipsed the IMU in terms of international notoriety, largely due to its role in an alleged bombing conspiracy in Germany. In September 2007, German police arrested three men (two German converts to Islam and a German national of Turkish descent) and seized a large quantity of concentrated hydrogen peroxide, a chemical that can be used to make explosives. The three suspects and a fourth defendant who was extradited from Turkey have been charged with several crimes, including preparing bombings and belonging to a terrorist organization. The IJU did not help the suspects' defense when it issued a statement claiming responsibility for the alleged plot, saying the plans were to attack the U.S. Air Force base at Ramstein—which plays a major role in supporting coalition forces in Afghanistan—as well as Uzbek and U.S. diplomatic buildings in Germany.[5] The statement said that it hoped the attacks would force the closure of the airbase at Termez in southern Uzbekistan, which the German military uses to support its deployments in northern Afghanistan. Since then, however, the IJU has primarily been involved in attacks in Afghanistan.

The IJU's Role in Afghanistan

Since 2008, the IJU has released statements and videos identifying members of the group from various countries who have carried out suicide bombings in Afghanistan, including Turks, Kurds and Azerbaijanis. One of the more recent attacks was carried out by Abu Ismail Kurdi during the night of July 3-4, 2009 in Paktika Province.[6] This seems to correspond with an assault on a base in Zerok district in northern Paktika that involved a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) and rocket fire that left 10 attackers and two U.S. soldiers dead.[7]

The IJU has coordinated attacks with the Haqqani network, an Afghan-led faction that operates autonomously under the Taliban name.[8] The two groups have a close relationship. This coordination was revealed by a March 3, 2008 suicide bombing. During the attack, a suicide bomber drove a VBIED to the Sabari district center in the eastern province of Khost. The bombing killed two U.S. soldiers and two Afghans.[9] It was initially claimed by Zabihullah Mujahid, one of the two Taliban spokesmen who act as conduits for all official communiqués from the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan." The insurgent commander Sirajuddin Haqqani, however, broke with this

1 Abu Yahya Muhammad Fatih confirmed in an interview dated May 31, 2007 that the group was formed in 2002. The interview can be found at www.sehadetzamani.com/haber_detay.php?haber_id=1203. The U.S. Department of the Treasury confirmed that Abu Yahya Muhammad Fatih is Najmiddin Jalolov when it blacklisted him on February 18, 2008. The state-controlled Uzbek media identified Jalolov as an IMU member as early as October 2000.

2 There are references to the IMU adopting the name Islamic Movement of Turkistan from 2003, and the name change was confirmed by a captured member of the group interviewed by *Moskovskiye Novosti* on November 25, 2005. The group, however, has since reverted to its original name.

3 These claims were issued in the name of the Islamic Jihad Group, which was proscribed as a terrorist group by the United States in May 2005. It seems to have adopted the name Islamic Jihad Union around this time.

4 A transcript of Islam Karimov's televised May 14, 2005 speech can be found using BBC's monitoring services.

5 "IJU Claims Responsibility for Foiled Attacks in Germany," German Federal Ministry of Interior, September 11, 2007.

6 The IJU statement can be found at www.sehadetzamani.com/haber_detay.php?haber_id=2154.

7 "U.S. Soldiers Killed in Afghanistan," BBC, July 4, 2009.

8 Regarding the Haqqani network's area of operations, see "Unravelling Haqqani's Net," *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, June 30, 2009. Combined Joint Task Force 82 issued a press release called "Coalition Forces Focus on Haqqani Network" on October 19, 2007 stating that Sirajuddin had taken over from his father. The statement is no longer available online.

9 A U.S. military spokesperson confirmed the details of the attack to the authors.

protocol and telephoned Pakistani journalists to claim that he personally masterminded the attack.[10] A few days later, the IJU released a written statement to Turkish language jihadist websites that claimed credit for the bombing and identified its perpetrator as Cüneyt Ciftci (also known as Saad Abu Furkan), a German national of Turkish descent. The IJU claim was supported by the subsequent release of a video showing Ciftci cheerfully helping to construct his VBIED, heaping bags onto the back of a small truck to disguise the explosives. The video included footage of the explosion.[11]

The video propelled Ciftci into the jihadist "hall of fame" and also shed light on the complexity of the Afghan insurgency. All three of the ostensibly rival claims were accurate. The attack was a joint operation by the IJU and the Haqqani network, and the Afghan Taliban claimed formal responsibility. Since then, with the exception of one attack in Jalalabad, all the suicide bombings claimed by the IJU have been carried out in the Haqqani network's sphere of influence in eastern Afghanistan, demonstrating the continuing close relationship between the IJU and the Haqqani network.

Turkish Connection and Al-Qa`ida's Influence

The IJU's growing international prominence is underpinned by its Turkish language propaganda drive since 2007, which has made the group a focus for Turkish jihadists. This public relations campaign is presumably the work of internet savvy Turkish speakers who translate and republish statements from the IJU and other groups. The IJU and sympathetic websites such as Sehadet Zamani (Martyrdom Time) encourage Turks to join or support the jihad and promote slain fighters as "martyrs" worthy of emulation. It is not clear how these Turkish cyber-jihadists teamed up with the IJU, but there is some evidence that Turks who are arriving in the Pakistani tribal areas to fight with the Taliban are being assigned to the Haqqani network.

This embedding process was outlined by Commander Abu Zer, the leader of a Turkish group called Taifetul Mansura (Victorious Sect). In an interview published by the Elif Media, Abu Zer said his group had been fighting in the North Caucasus for 15 years, but had moved to Afghanistan in early 2009 where it had been assigned *ansar*[12] (local helpers) with whom to work.[13] Another statement released by the same group in June announcing the death of two of its members in Khost suggested that the Haqqani network is the *ansar* in question.[14] While there is no evidence of an explicit link between Taifetul Mansura and the IJU, Turkish volunteers are apparently being channeled toward the Haqqani network's bases in North Waziristan Agency in Pakistan, where there are established contingents that speak their language.[15]

There have been hints of al-Qa`ida's involvement with the IJU-Haqqani alliance, and al-Qa`ida likely considers the IJU's connections to the Turkish jihadist community an asset. The development of operational links between the groups would allow al-Qa`ida to tap into new networks that could be used to facilitate attacks in Turkey and Europe, or allow the IJU to use al-Qa`ida's expertise for its own operations in Central Asia.

The clearest example of al-Qa`ida's connections to the IJU occurred when al-Qa`ida leader Abu Yahya al-Libi appeared alongside IJU leader Abu Yahya Muhammad Fatih in an IJU video dated May 28, 2009.[16] This was the first time an al-Qa`ida leader has publicly endorsed the IJU. Shaykh Sa`id Mustafa Abu'l-Yazid, al-Qa`ida's "general commander" for Afghanistan, then released a statement on June 10 appealing to Turks for financial support.[17]

When pushed by an al-Jazira journalist to explain al-Qa`ida's support for the Taliban, Abu'l-Yazid said in a recent interview:

> Last year's operation in Khost was reported in the media. It was an attack against the U.S. command headquarters at the Khost airport. God be praised, this was arranged by al-Qa`ida with the participation of our brother Taliban. This was one of the major operations in which we participated. Many of the martyrdom operations that took place in Khost, Kabul and other areas were planned by our brothers and we participated in them.[18]

This is almost certainly a reference to attacks on Forward Operating Base Salerno, a major U.S. base near Khost city, on August 18-19, 2008.[19]

Al-Qa`ida is clearly trying to associate itself with the perceived operational success of the Haqqani network and trying to capitalize on the IJU's ability to mobilize the Turkish jihadist community. It seems plausible that al-Qa`ida has played a role in networking between the Uzbeks, Turks and the Haqqani network, but there is insufficient open source evidence to conclude that al-Qa`ida was instrumental in developing the IJU into a repository for non-Arab fighters joining the Taliban.

10 Regarding the Taliban's claims, see "Taliban Attack US Military Camp in Kost," *The News*, March 4, 2008.

11 The video can be found at www.sehadetzamani.com/haber_detay.php?haber_id=1911.

12 The word *ansar* is a reference to the citizens of Yathrib/Medina who helped the Muslim exiles from Mecca, known as the *muhajirin*, during the *hijra* (622 AD). Contemporary jihadists use the words *ansar* for local forces and *muhajirin* for foreign fighters.

13 The interview can be found at www.elifmedya.wordpress.com/2009/05/29/17/.

14 The statement can be found at www.elifmedya.wordpress.com/2009/06/22/zulum-son-buluncaya-kadar-savasacagiz/.

15 It is not clear how this process is organized. Some likely arrrive in Peshawar where they are eventually directed to Turkish speakers in North Waziristan. Others are probably led in by facilitators. For example, see Paul Cruickshank, "The 2008 Belgium Cell and FATA's Terrorist Pipeline," *CTC Sentinel* 2:4 (2009).

16 The video can be found at www.sehadetzamani.com/reklam_detay.php?id=79.

17 The Turkish translation of the Arabic statement can be found at www.taifetulmansura.com/71811_Seyh-Ebu-Yezid'den-Mesaj-Var.html.

18 The interview was broadcast by al-Jazira on June 21, 2009.

19 Personal interview, U.S. military intelligence source, FOB Salerno, Afghanistan, February 2009. For more details of the attack, see "Unravelling Haqqani's Net." The incident was also mentioned in a document summarizing the interrogation of Bryant Neal Vinas, a U.S. al-Qa`ida recruit captured in Pakistan in November 2008. Vinas said it was planned by al-Qa`ida's leaders and that it went badly. He identified one of the suicide bombers as a Turk, although the IJU does not seem to have claimed him as one of its own.

Separately, the IJU proved it is more than a Taliban proxy by carrying out an attack in its homeland on May 26, 2009. Uzbek authorities confirmed that a police checkpoint was attacked near Khanabad on the border with Kyrgyzstan early in the morning and that a suicide bomber blew himself up later that day in Andijan. The IJU claimed responsibility for the incidents in its May 28 video, thereby proving that it was still determined to carry out attacks in Uzbekistan that are completely unrelated to the insurgency in Afghanistan.

The IMU Avoids Being Overshadowed

Like the IJU, the IMU now appears to be heightening publicity for its operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In January, March and April of 2009, it released its own videos featuring Germans encouraging their fellow countrymen to join them in Afghanistan.[20] On July 11, 2009, the IMU released an Uzbek-language video claiming that one of its members carried out a suicide bombing on April 4 in Miran Shah in Pakistan's North Waziristan Agency. This corresponds to an incident that reportedly killed one Pakistani soldier and seven civilians.[21] This seems to be the first time that the IMU has explicitly claimed a suicide bombing.[22] That video identified militants from various countries, including China, Germany, Russia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

The location of the suicide bombing claimed by the IMU reflects the targeting priorities of its host. While the IJU is likely embedded with the Haqqani network and has focused on Afghanistan, the IMU has been fighting for Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud's faction since April 2007 when it was evicted from the Wana area of South Waziristan by rival Taliban commander Maulvi Nazir.[23] Baitullah's faction and its allies have been engaged in an escalating war with the Pakistani state, during which the Uzbeks have earned a reputation as loyal and capable fighters. The IMU also operates in Afghanistan's northern Zabul Province and southern Ghazni Province.[24]

Conclusion

Both the IMU and IJU are competing to showcase their international memberships and their enthusiasm for carrying out suicide bombings. The IJU apparently has permission to claim attacks independently of the established Taliban propaganda system: as the group's hosts, the Haqqanis would be in a position to end the IJU claims if they disproved of them. This is probably a reflection of the perceived usefulness of the propaganda campaign in recruiting more volunteers to carry out similar attacks, thereby ensuring a steady supply of ideologically committed bombers.

The IMU now seems to be pursuing a similar strategy, and can be expected to claim more suicide bombings. It will probably claim bombings carried out on behalf of the Pakistani Taliban and targeting security forces, rather than civilians, to ensure the attacks are widely perceived as legitimate. If it continues to emulate the IJU, the IMU will also look to return to action in Central Asia, thereby demonstrating to its core audience that it can confront the regimes of the former Soviet republics.

For al-Qa`ida's part, it will continue to associate itself with the IJU in an attempt to gain access to the group's network in Europe and Turkey and to achieve propaganda gains from the IJU's increased frequency of attacks.

Jeremy Binnie is the senior terrorism and insurgency analyst at IHS Jane's. He is the editor of Jane's Terrorism & Security Monitor *and an associate editor (terrorism and insurgency) of* Jane's Intelligence Review.

Joanna Wright is a journalist who spent eight months working on assignment for Janes in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2008-2009.

20 Links to the IMU video released in April can be found at www.ansarnet.info/showthread.php?p=8113.

21 "Eight Killed in Miranshah Suicide Bombing," *Daily Times*, April 5, 2009.

22 Links to the video can be found at www.ansarnet.info/showthread.php?t=1998.

23 The alliance between Baitullah Mehsud and the Uzbek jihadists has been well documented by the Pakistani press and was further evidenced by footage of Hakimullah Mehsud, a key lieutenant of Baitullah at the time, driving a captured Humvee in the IMU's "Soldiers of Allah" video.

24 Personal interview, U.S. military intelligence source, FOB Sharana, Afghanistan, January 2009.