

## **Is Uzbek Guerrilla Force Planning Homecoming?**

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Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan has relocated next door to Tajikistan, though analysts doubt it will move back into Central Asia.

Central Asia's most feared Islamic group appears to have regrouped in Afghanistan but may not be capable of staging a repeat of incursions it mounted in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan a decade ago, security experts said.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU, has rebased itself in northern Afghanistan close to the border with Tajikistan, according to officials there, and has been blamed for a string of armed attacks over the summer.

Despite the reported death of its leader Tohir Yoldash, the IMU still seems to be a cohesive military force with a radical Islamist agenda. With powerful alliances with the Taleban and al-Qaeda, it could in theory pose a serious security threat to the former Soviet states of Central Asia.

When IWPR reporters questioned security experts in the region, they agreed that sporadic outbreaks of violence in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, in particular, make the threat of renewed insurgent activity possible. But they said that for the moment, this would not be on a scale that Central Asian governments could not handle, and the IMU lacked a substantial following in the region.

If Yoldash is indeed dead – which a recent report throws into some doubt – there are questions about whether the IMU will survive in its present form under a new leader or break up into smaller factions. Some experts also suggest that the group has relocated to Afghanistan not entirely by choice, but because the combination of a major Pakistani ground offensive and United States unmanned planes on a mission to pick off al-Qaeda's top men is making their stay in South Waziristan untenable.

### **UZBEK MILITANTS ON THE MOVE**

This autumn, Afghan officials have expressed repeated concern that the Taleban are shifting forces to the north of the country. Talking to journalists on September 23, Afghan General Mustafa Patang said hundreds of militants had arrived in the north.

IMU forces are part of this flow, and many seem to have turned up in Kunduz province, which adjoins Tajikistan, although they have also been sighted in other northern provinces. (See IWPR's report on this: **Could IMU Chief's Death Curb Rebel Force in Afghanistan?**, ARR No. 340, 07-Oct-09.)

"Tohir Yoldash's men have come to northern Afghanistan and have caused much of our recent insecurity," General Khalilullah Aminzada, security chief of Jowzjan province in the northwest, told IWPR reporters in Afghanistan earlier this autumn.

Sanobar Shermatova, a Moscow-based Central Asia analyst, has argued in an article entitled **Should Central Asia Fear Taleban Spillover?**

that on the one hand, the Uzbek militants have moved because their stronghold in South Waziristan is no longer a safe haven; and on the other, that they have been assigned Kunduz as their area of operation since they are familiar with the territory.

The aim, she argues, may be to disrupt the new northern supply route now being used by NATO and Coalition forces in Afghanistan, after Central Asian governments offered routes through their territory.

Abdughani Mamadazimov, who heads the National Association of Political Scientists of Tajikistan, agrees that the IMU is under increasing pressure in Pakistan, not only from government troops and US air strikes, and points out that some local Pashtun tribal leaders are hostile to what they regard as an alien presence on their territory. There have been reports in recent years that Uzbek militants have sided with their protector Baitullah Mehsud in fighting with rival Pashtun tribal groups.

Mamadazimov likened the IMU to a "wounded beast" pursued by hunters and forced to become "agile and flexible, changing location frequently".

### **FROM UZBEKISTAN TO WAZIRISTAN**

The seeds of the IMU grew in Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley in the early Nineties, when Yoldash was a leading figure in an Islamic group called Adolat based in the city of Namangan in Fergana Valley. A crackdown ordered by President Islam Karimov forced members to flee the country, and many became caught up in a civil war in neighbouring Tajikistan, where they fought alongside Islamist forces against the government, with Jumaboy Khojaev, otherwise known as Juma Namangani, as their military commander.

It was after the Tajik conflict ended in 1997 that the IMU emerged as a distinct force whose agenda was to topple secular governments in Central Asian states, first and foremost in its homeland Uzbekistan. To this end, IMU guerrillas launched a series of raids into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000. These attacks made international headlines and alerted regional governments to shortcomings in their security forces, but did not pose an existential threat to these states.

By this time, with bases in Afghanistan, the group had formed an alliance with that country's Taleban rulers, and when the US-led Coalition arrived in late 2001, the IMU put up resistance in Kunduz. Namangani was killed, and the survivors escaped to Pakistan's lawless fringes

Yoldash, who had played more of an ideological role while Namangani led the troops, now stepped in as overall leader. According to Shermatova, the high casualties the IMU sustained in Kunduz led Yoldash to announce a change in strategy. Shifting from a specifically Central Asian focus, "the IMU joined the global jihad against the West," she said.

In South Waziristan, the tribal agency where it remained until recent months, the IMU reportedly maintained close ties with Baitullah Mehsud, the Pakistani Taleban leader killed by a US rocket in early August.

The IMU has preserved its distinctive Uzbek identity, producing propaganda videos and speeches by Yoldash which mix global jihadi rhetoric with Central Asia-specific content.

These days, though, it is hard to say how many IMU members are actually from Uzbekistan.

Andrei Grozin, director of the Central Asian department at the Commonwealth of Independent States Institute in Moscow, believes the IMU is no longer the "purely Uzbek" organisation it once was, but instead a "large organised group of foreign mercenaries".

"It is mainly a tool that is used by the leadership of other organisations like the Taleban and al-Qaeda," he said.

## **UNCERTAIN FUTURE**

The IMU's future was cast into doubt by reports that Yoldash had been wounded in a US rocket on August 27 and died shortly afterwards. Pakistani intelligence sources confirmed his death, and it appeared that, like his ally Baitullah Mehsud, killed in a similar manner earlier that month, the IMU leader actually was dead.

However, reports have now appeared that Yoldash has surfaced. The Washington-based Middle East Media Research Institute said on November 16 that the IMU had released a propaganda video that included a talk by Yoldash.

It remains unclear whether the footage offers clues as to whether it really is new. Although an IMU spokesman denied reports of Yoldash's death soon after they first appeared in September, this is the first time since then that a purported statement from the leader himself has appeared.

Orozbek Moldaliev, who heads Religion, Politics and Security, a think-tank in Kyrgyzstan, believes Yoldash will be hard to replace.

"He devoted 21 years to this movement. He and Juma Namangani complemented one another well," said Moldaliev. "After his death, there will be a leadership struggle, and this far it is not clear whether it will lead to a split, or whether someone will be able to keep the movement together."

According to Miroslav Niazov, former secretary of the Kyrgyz Security Council, Yoldash was an "extraordinarily influential figure" who commanded authority and was able to "gather forces and like-minded people around him to make a serious impact on the Central Asian region".

Tashpulat Yoldashev, an Uzbek political analyst now living abroad, predicts that internal divisions will cause the IMU to "fall into several parts", but he added that its "sponsors" - those who provide funding for groups of this kind - would prevent it from disappearing.

If it wanted to refocus its energies on Central Asia, the IMU would be hard pushed to recruit support, as it has little support on the ground, analysts say.

Marat Mamadshoev, editor-in-chief of the Asia Plus newspaper in Tajikistan, believes the group's influence

is over-estimated. “The IMU doesn’t currently pose a real threat to the region’s security,” he said “The authoritarian regimes that dominate the region do not have broad-based public support, but neither does the IMU in Uzbekistan, except in a few areas.”

Nematullo Mirsaidov, chief editor of the Tretyi Vzgl'yad newspaper based in Isfara in northern Tajikistan, is similarly dismissive. “Aside from carrying out terrorist attacks, it is incapable of doing anything more substantial, something that would alter the public mood,” he said.

## **UPSURGE IN VIOLENCE, BUT STILL LOCALISED**

Militant groups are active in Central Asia, albeit on a small scale. Over the spring and summer, an armed group believed to consist of militants previously based in Pakistan established itself in the eastern mountains of Tajikistan. It was dispersed after some skirmishes with government security forces. (For reports on these incursions, read [\*\*Chasing Phantoms in the Tajik Mountains\*\*](#) and [\*\*Taming Tajikistan’s Eastern Valleys\*\*](#).)

Officials identified some of the militants involved as having IMU links, and last month they reported that police had killed four suspected IMU members and arrested one.

In the south of Kyrgyzstan, there were also sporadic clashes between militants and the security forces. (See [\*\*Upsurge in Militant Presence in Kyrgyzstan\*\*](#), from July.) In October, Kyrgyz border guards were fired on by unidentified armed men trying to cross over from Tajikistan.

In Uzbekistan, a series of attacks appeared to target police as representatives of the state.

In late May, a police checkpoint on the outskirts of Khanabad, near the city of Andijan, came under attack. A policeman and one of the attackers were wounded in the exchange of fire, according to the Uzbek prosecutor’s office. The next day, a suicide bomber killed himself and a policeman in Andijan itself.

In August the deputy head of the interior ministry’s counter-terrorism department, Colonel Hasan Asadov, was killed. Two Muslim clerics were attacked in July in apparently related incidents – Abror Abrorov, deputy head of the Kukeldash madrassa in Tashkent was murdered, and the capital’s chief imam or mosque leader, Anvar-Qori Tursunov, was the target of a failed assassination attempt. It seems most likely that both clerics were singled out by militants for being too close to government and for preaching against radicalism.

At the end of August, security forces conducting a sweep in the capital Tashkent cornered a group of armed men and engaged them in a sustained gunbattle, killing two or three of them, according to various reports.

The question now being asked is whether these attacks were coordinated, and masterminded by the IMU as a precursor to a larger incursion.

Mirsaidov believes that might be the case.

“It’s most likely that all these incidents were elements of an operation designed to test the authorities’ military strength and the popular mood,” he said. “If the outcome had been successful, there might have been incursions by more substantial forces. It’s no coincidence that the clashes happened in those areas where militants would be able to enter [from Afghanistan], and where the local population might have been supportive. But it didn’t come off.”

Others are less certain that the IMU or allied groups have a grand plan.

“The acts of terrorism taking place here [in Central Asia generally] are largely spontaneous,” said Mamadshoev. “There’s no unified leadership, and frankly I don’t see any kind of logic to them.”

## **ARE OTHER GROUPS INVOLVED?**

If it is the case, as many analysts interviewed for this report suggest, that the IMU is not the driving force behind sporadic militant attacks in the Central Asian states, could other groups with a stronger presence on the ground be playing a part?

Within Central Asia, officials often accuse Hizb ut-Tahrir of complicity in violent incidents. This group has a radical agenda – replacing secular governments with an Islamic state – but always insists it is against violence.

Many analysts say there is little hard evidence to connect Hizb ut-Tahrir with armed attacks in the region, although one of those interviewed, Mirsaidov, said it was possible that the group has “renounced non-violent struggle [and] its members may be behind the attacks on law-enforcement agencies.”

(For a report from April on Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan, see [\*\*Kyrgyzstan: Does Tough Policing Spell\*\*](#))

## **End of Islamic Radicalism?)**

Moldaliev argues that a distinction should be made between movements like Hizb ut-Tahrir which seek to recruit as large a following as possible, and armed groups like the IMU which espouse violence and maintain a smaller but more committed membership.

Shermatova believes it “highly unlikely” that Hizb ut-Tahrir or Tablighi Jamaat, a proselytising group now active in Central Asia, are involved in violence, even if officials sometimes level that accusation against them.

At the same time, she said, organisations preaching radical Islam may provide militants with a recruiting ground. “The authorities suspect that they supply members for more radical groups. Experts believe that some members of these non-jihadi religious groups go off and join armed groups under the influence of preachers,” she said.

Another possible suspect is the Islamic Jihad Group, which split off from the IMU in Pakistan after an apparent disagreement over strategy.

Vitaly Ponomarev, a Central Asia expert with the Moscow-based Human Rights group Memorial, points out that although information about the Islamic Jihad Group remains sketchy, it has claimed responsibility for previous violence in Uzbekistan.

“It is more secretive than the IMU, but that is no reason to ignore it completely, especially now that there’s sufficient evidence to say it is becoming more active in Central Asia,” said Ponomarev.

Assessments of the IMU’s role and influence are complicated by the tendency for Central Asian governments to blame it for violence in the region, even when evidence for this is thin on the ground. Analysts advise treating such claims with caution.

Moldaliev said it was common practice for investigators to cite both the IMU and Hizb ut-Tahrir as culprits after attacks took place.

“Given that investigations are kept under wraps and given the nature of legal practice generally in Central Asia, it’s difficult to establish IMU complicity,” he said. “There’s always a temptation to exaggerate the threat a bit, especially when [law enforcement] budgets are under review.”

According to Uzbek political analyst Yoldashev, “It plays into the hands of Central Asian governments to position themselves as the victims of Islamic extremism and terrorism, and to blame innocent people with the aim of obtaining more assistance from the US and European Union and of justifying repressive policies.”

## **RISKS FROM LOCAL GRIEVANCES, NOT GLOBAL JIHAD**

Niazov, the former secretary of Kyrgyzstan’s Security Council, believes the IMU still has some life left in it.

“It isn’t about how numerous the IMU is, but rather about what kind of support it has,” he said.

Niazov said that while Islamic groups were not in a position to mount a serious military threat to Central Asian states, the danger was that other factors would come together to create instability which they could then take advantage of.

“The conditions would have to be right for it,” he explained. “But the conditions are there for a social upheaval – disputes over water, land and borders, fast-rising prices and low wages, unemployment and migration. These small and disparate point of tension could become systemic and grow into one cohesive whole.

“So one cannot say that these [radical Islamic] forces will spark an upheaval, but they could exploit the unfavourable situation in the region to take charge of that upheaval.”

To defuse the risks of widespread violence led by radicals like the IMU, Shermatova believes Central Asian governments should adopt a mix of security and social policies.

Counter-insurgency tactics might include better border controls to stop people bribing their way across, while offering an amnesty to militants who return from Afghanistan and Pakistan might have a positive effect, she said.

But governments must also tackle the social and economic problems that drive people towards extremist views . Just one step – clearing away corruption and bureaucracy so as to allow small businesses to take off and thrive – would be “revolutionary” in its effects, Shermatova said.

“Poverty gives rise to discontent and encourages the search for political methods of changing society,” she added.

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