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Uzbek militants carve north Afghan niche

By Abubakar Siddique

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Northern Afghanistan, for years seen as a bedrock of stability amid the chaos of war, is being pushed further into turmoil with every kill and every capture.

A deadly attack on the offices of the governor of northern Takhar province on May 28 provided a window into the transformation that is taking place in the north. Killed in the attack were the Afghan national police commander, General Mohammad Daud Daud, and the province's police chief. Takhar's governor and a German general were wounded.

When Afghan and Western forces claimed to have captured an Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) recruit this month, a worrying trend was exposed when international forces linked him to the Takhar attack.

Rising violence, the recruitment of locals and the adoption of sophisticated techniques all showcase the extent to which the IMU has made inroads into ethnic Uzbek communities - an important minority in the multicultural region. With the entrance of the IMU comes the arrival of the Taliban-led insurgency, highlighting the groups' strengthening alliances.

The killing of Daud, one of the government forces' more charismatic leaders, is the continuation of a string of assassinations of senior government figures, and serves as a blow to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-Afghan government offensive against the Taliban.

If left unchecked, observers warn, alliances between the al-Qaeda-linked IMU and the Taliban

could not only destabilize northern Afghanistan but establish it as a launching pad for attacks across Central Asia and beyond.

Religious ideology

Mohammad Asim, a former lawmaker from the northern Baghlan province, says that the IMU has already successfully carved out a niche for itself in northern Afghanistan. Their ultimate aim, he says, is to build a base for operations across Central Asia, but they are also showing a willingness to fight against Afghan and international forces in the region.

"They have created some influence among the Uzbeks living in these [northern] regions. Some of their cadres [and leaders] have been killed in operations by the international forces. In any case, there are people related to them here who are trying hard to continue underground activities," Asim said.

Drawing on his experience as a field commander against the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, Asim considers the Taliban, the IMU, and other groups to be primarily motivated by their religious ideology. They care less about ethnic affiliations, he says, but points out that the Taliban and IMU do exploit ethnic solidarity to network and expand into new regions.

Just a few years ago, a Taliban comeback in the region would have been considered unthinkable. But the Taliban have crept back with the help of locals, including ethnic Uzbek IMU recruits who have worked hard to win over allies in remote Uzbek villages.

The Taliban's relationship with the IMU dates back to the late 1990s, when the Taliban hosted the Central Asian militants in response to Tashkent's support for ethnic Uzbek warlord General Abdul Rashid Dostum, according to senior Taliban leaders who have since reconciled with Kabul.

Today, the two enjoy a symbiotic relationship. While Pashtun youth still make up the majority of recruits for the Taliban across Afghanistan, the group's ties to the IMU - whose ranks are filled with Sunni Muslims of Central Asian origin - raises its standing among ethnic Uzbeks, Tajiks and Turkmen, as well as other non-Pashtun communities in northern Afghanistan.

The Taliban's alliance with the IMU, meanwhile, allows the IMU small sanctuaries in remote regions along Afghanistan's northern border, providing it with an opportunity to train fresh recruits and putting it in a position to carry out strikes in neighboring Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan.

Afghan observers say that Uzbek communities are particularly vulnerable to IMU infiltration because of their increasingly marginal political role. Numbering around 2.5 million out of Afghanistan's nearly 30 million people, the Uzbeks are Afghanistan's largest Turkic group spread across nine northern provinces.

But compared to their Pashtun, Tajik and Hazarah neighbors they have a marginal political role because of a lack of unified leadership. Abdul Rashid Dostum, the former communist general

who once dominated the region, has lost popular appeal and has proved to be an inept leader.

Such conditions presented an opening to the extremists. Former Afghan deputy defense minister General Attiqullah Baryalai says that the IMU began building its networks in northern Afghanistan after the killing of its erstwhile leader, Tahir Yuldash, in a US drone attack in western Pakistan in 2009. He says that the group has also stepped up its activities in Central Asia, which remains its ultimate prize.

Pakistan

connection

Baryalai says that three factors helped the IMU to establish footholds in northern Afghanistan's scattered Uzbek communities.

"The Uzbek people feel that they are marginalized today and nobody among the current [Afghan] government leaders represents them. Secondly, many influential [Uzbek] former government officials and mujahideen and anti-Taliban leaders have been relegated to oblivion, which makes them upset with the government [and prevents them from cooperating with it]," Baryalai said.

"The third reason is the emergence of radical youth who were educated in Pakistani *madrassas*."

The connection with Pakistan is important because the IMU underwent a transformation during its decade-long refuge in the country's western tribal region. It drew the IMU closer to al-Qaeda's leadership, making it a lead organization for recruiting across the Turkic world and north Caucasus. It also grew closer to Pakistani extremist organizations, many of which now serve as al-Qaeda's military arm and are considerably more sophisticated than previous generations.

This makeover is on display in northern Afghanistan. Analyst Waheed Mozhdah says that the Taliban and IMU have infiltrated government forces in northern Afghanistan, which helps them in pulling off sophisticated attacks such as the one on May 28. He says that government corruption and inefficiency pushes disgruntled youth of the region into the hands of the extremists.

"The real problem [that needs to be addressed] is not that the extremists are [militarily] strengthening every day. Instead, it is necessary to focus on the conditions, which push people to join them. If killing the terrorists remains the only aim, then thousands [of new recruits] will replace the terrorists killed," Mozhdah said.

Mohammad Asim, the former politician from Baghlan, says that the instability in the north means it will be unsuitable as a testing ground for Afghan forces. The state's fledgling police and security bodies are slated to take over security responsibilities of parts of some northern regions in July. Nine provinces in the north are being eyed as the first to fall under complete Afghan responsibility as US/NATO forces draw down with the goal of complete withdrawal by 2014.

Former defense official Barayalai remains unbowed despite the difficulties. He believes the security situation in northern Afghanistan is not an unsolvable problem. "The government has to move ahead with an informed and proper solution," he concludes.