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Could IMU Chief's Death Curb Rebel Force in Afghanistan?

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Tahir Yuldash is reported dead, but his Uzbek guerrillas still appear to be creating havoc in the north.

The reported death of the leader of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU, would be a blow to a militant group which is close to the Taleban and has recently become a thorn in the side of security forces in Afghanistan.

Radio Liberty first reported the death of Tahir Yuldash (Tohir Yoldash in Uzbek), quoting a man who claimed to be his bodyguard. Wire services later quoted Pakistani intelligence officials as confirming that he died in late August in a United States rocket strike in the Pakistani region of South Waziristan.

However, in a statement that appeared on the Russian language website fergana.ru, the IMU insisted its leader was alive and well.

The movement lost its military commander, Juma Namangani, in US air strikes during the 2001 invasion of northern Afghanistan, soon after it had relocated there from Central Asia and teamed up with the Taleban.

In Afghanistan, reports of Yuldash's death have led to speculation about the future of the IMU.

“Tahir Yuldash led a movement whose supporters have been active in northern Afghanistan for some time now,” said military analyst and retired army officer Colonel Sharyar Arghawan. “Now it falls to his replacement to determine how active the group will be.”

Uzbek fighters from the IMU have been stirring up trouble in northern Afghanistan for the past several months, according to security officials.

“Tahir Yuldash’s men have come to northern Afghanistan and have caused much of our recent insecurity,” said General Khalilullah Aminzada, security chief in Jowzjan province. “For example, in Jowzjan in August, insurgents organised an attack on the district governor’s office in Khosh Teppa, killing the governor and ten other officials. And in June, a roadside bomb in the Aqcha area of Balkh province killed three employees of DHSAs.”

Development Humanitarian Services for Afghanistan, DHSAs, is an Afghan non-governmental organisation that facilitates a wide range of development projects in the country. According to Aminzada, the DHSAs staff who were killed were providing disaster relief to people displaced by floods in northern Afghanistan.

Aminzada pointed to other security problems including attacks on bridges, the destruction of schools and the distribution of “night letters” threatening those who work with the government.

There are certainly growing signs of instability in an area once considered relatively calm. Two districts in Kunduz province are now virtually no-go zones.

All across northern Afghanistan, the situation is deteriorating, and analysts say that the proximity of the Central Asian states is helping to foster the conflict. Balkh and Jowzjan share a border with Uzbekistan, while Kunduz, Takhar and Badakhshan directly abut Tajikistan. Herat, Faryab and Badghis abut Turkmenistan. Northern Afghanistan also has substantial communities of Turkmen and especially Uzbeks.

“In the past the Taleban were all Pashtuns, but now I myself see Uzbek and Turkmen Taleban,” said Taj Mohammad, a resident of Khwaja Mosa village in the Pashtunkot district of Faryab. “I sleep in fear. The Taleban have made it clear that their rules must be implemented. Schools for both boys and girls have been closed over the past month, because the Taleban were demanding that teachers pay them 1,000 afghani from their salaries. I cannot understand why more than 40 countries are not able to curb such a small group.”

Shah Morad, a resident of Jowzjan province, confirmed the presence of Uzbeks and Turkmen among the insurgents.

“There didn’t use to be Uzbeks and Turkmen amongst the Taleban,” he said. “But now, because of cooperation with Tahir Yuldash, these two [ethnic] groups have changed. They raid villages at night and warn people not to cooperate with the government.”

The IMU is a fundamentalist organisation whose stated aim is to establish an Islamic state in Uzbekistan. Yuldash was a well-known activist in Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley in the early 1990s, where he was part of an Islamic group that emerged in the city of Namangan. The IMU's military commander, Jumaboy Khojaev, also came from the city, which he used as his nom de guerre, Juma Namangani.

Harsh repression by Uzbek president Islam Karimov soon put a stop to the emergence of Islamic groupings across the Fergana Valley, and Yuldash, Namangani and their followers went looking for new battlegrounds.

Namangani's guerrillas from Fergana played a major part in Tajikistan's 1992-97 civil war, fighting alongside Tajik Islamist forces against the government. When the conflict ended, the IMU emerged as a coherent force, and mounted a series of raids into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000. Shifting from Tajikistan to Afghanistan, the group allied itself with the Taleban.

In 2001, Namangani was killed during the US-led invasion that sent the Taleban packing. The bulk of the IMU then decamped to Waziristan, where it has remained since, reportedly maintaining close ties with Baitullah Mehsud, the Pakistani Taleban leader killed by a US rocket in early August. The reappearance of IMU forces in the Afghan north appears to have happened earlier this year.

Now Yuldash may be gone as well, and Afghans are waiting to see whether his death will give them some relief from the worsening situation.

"I hear every day in the media that an attack has taken place in Balkh, Faryab, Jowzjan or Samangan, and police have been killed," said Mohammad Daud, a resident of Mazar-e-Sharif, capital of Balkh province. "Just one year ago, such things were very rare in the north."

General Khalilullah Anderabi, a security chief in Faryab, told IWPR that Yuldash and his IMU were using Islamic rhetoric to try to stir up trouble for the Afghan government by encouraging local people to carry out attacks and other operations.

"Over the past three to four months the people of the north have been deceived by Yuldash, and have carried out some destructive operations," he said. As examples, he cited several incidents in Faryab – the assassination of a security chief in the Shirin Tagab district, four police killed in Almar district, and several bombs planted on the road between Faryab and Balkh.

"Yuldash has been giving Islamic speeches here, while his own country Uzbekistan doesn't have an Islamic system and people can do whatever they like there. If Tahir Yuldash loves Islam, he should go and deliver his propaganda over there," said Anderabi.