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Central Asian militants spoiling for combat

By Abubakar Siddique

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A decade after its debut on the terrorism scene in the Pamirs as Central Asia's most aggressive militant group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) has undergone a transformation hundreds of kilometers to the southeast, in the mountains of Pakistan's restive Waziristan region.

The IMU is no longer a small band of militants focused on taking down the Uzbek regime and replacing it with an Islamic state. Today, it has a much wider reach and more ambitious goals, and has underlined its revival with attacks that suggest a presence across a wide swathe of South and Central Asia.

Recently, militants belonging directly to the IMU or its offshoots have been tied to a deadly bomb attack in Tajikistan and violence in the country's eastern Rasht Valley. Its name has been linked to terror plots targeting Europe. Experts say security forces encountered elements of the IMU during sweeps in southern Kyrgyzstan this month, and see indications that the group is gathering strength in Central Asia and building new sanctuaries in northern Afghanistan.

Few would have predicted this at the turn of the century.

Out of the ashes

After leaving Central Asia for Afghanistan to join the Taliban in their final push against

Northern Alliance commander Ahmed Shah Masud in 2000, IMU militants were all but wiped out while fighting against US-led forces in November 2001. From there they sought refuge across the border in northwest Pakistan.

The IMU initially kept a relatively low profile in its new safe haven, even as its thousands of Central Asian recruits strengthened alliances with militant organizations such as al-Qaeda, the Pakistani Taliban, and various other Pakistani jihadist groups.

A bombing in February 2008 in Shabqadar - a rural agricultural region close to Peshawar, capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province - gave notice that the IMU was again a force to be reckoned with.

The intended target, secular Pashtun politician Afrasiab Khattak, survived the attack. But 25 people who had assembled to hear him speak were killed.

Khattak, today a senator and leader of the Awami National Party (ANP), says that the government's investigations revealed the attack was perpetrated by an IMU suicide bomber. The ANP-led provincial government subsequently fought and captured many Central Asian militants in Swat Valley during a highly publicized military operation there in summer 2009, providing further evidence of the expanded role of Central Asians in Pakistan.

Khattak says the IMU and its splinter groups are deeply enmeshed with al-Qaeda and constitute the majority of its foot soldiers in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the swath of Pashtun territories along Pakistan's western border with Afghanistan.

"Although the leadership of al-Qaeda is Arab, its cadres are filled with people of Central Asian origin. They include ethnic Uzbeks, Chechens, and Muslims from the southern Russian regions," Khattak says. "It's not that there is [a definite number] of the people living here for long time - they attract new recruits [from Central Asia]. From here, they infiltrate back to northern Afghanistan and from there launch attacks inside Central Asia."

This would mark the IMU's return to its origins, albeit not in its original form.

New look

The IMU no longer has one of its founders in its ranks. This summer the group acknowledged the death of one of its founders, Tahir Yuldash, a year after he died from injuries sustained in a U.S. drone attack in South Waziristan. Usmon Odil has been announced as the IMU's new leader, although there is no authentic verification of his real identity.

Pakistani journalist and author Ahmed Rashid says the IMU can no longer be seen as one body, having spawned other groups with more militant and far-reaching agendas.

"Several things seem to have happened, first of all they have splintered very badly," Rashid says. "There are several Central Asian groups which seem to have splintered away from the IMU, including the Islamic Jihad Union [and] the Taliban of Central Asia. We don't know exactly how these splinters were formed but possibly by al-Qaeda as a means for keeping control of these groups."

The IMU or its affiliates have been named in connection with a number of recent attacks at home and abroad.

One, the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), has been blamed for attacks in Uzbekistan in May 2009 and made headlines around the world this fall after Western intelligence determined they were planning Mumbai-style attacks on European soil. More than 10 of its key members were subsequently killed in drone strikes in North Waziristan. The IJU, considered a more radical affiliate of the IMU, attracts recruits from Germany's burgeoning Turkish diaspora and Turkic nations, leading observers to suggest that it is driven by pan-Turkic aims.

In September, a convoy of government troops was attacked in eastern Tajikistan, killing 23 soldiers. Tajik authorities accused militants affiliated with the IMU of carrying out the attack. The same month, in what appeared to be the first suicide attack in Tajikistan, two suicide car bombers killed one policeman and wounded 30 when a police station was attacked in the northern city of Khujand. Jamaat Ansarullah, a previously unknown group that Tajik authorities now consider a radical offshoot of the IMU, took credit for the attack.

In the course of operations to contain the militant threat on their soil this year, Tajik authorities have claimed to have killed scores of IMU fighters making cross-border incursions from northern Afghanistan. In Afghanistan itself, a mounting number of attacks have been attributed to the IMU.

Analyst Rashid, who has pioneered research on the IMU, says that even as the group and its offshoots have evolved, their brand of Islamic revolution has maintained a Central Asian identity.

Rashid notes that the May 2005 Andijan massacre, in which Uzbek troops opened fire on mass street protests against the government, provided a recruitment boost for the IMU and the jihadist movement in general. The deaths of hundreds, possibly thousands, of civilians in the largest city of the Ferghana Valley, which traverses Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, sent shockwaves across the region. Afterward, Rashid says of the IMU, "there were large numbers of Central Asians who escaped and came down to join them" in Pakistani tribal areas.

There he says, "they have been fighting for many different people: the Pakistani Taliban, the Afghan Taliban, [the] Haqqani group. They have been taking part in internal fights in the tribal areas in Pakistan."

This, he adds, "has given them a lot of experience".

Some capitals overmatched?

Retired Lieutenant General Masood Aslam, who as commander of Pakistani military's IX Corps oversaw Islamabad's counter-terrorism operations in the northwest, concurs. He says Central Asians "are sought after by various militant groups".

For Islamabad, the presence of Central Asian militants on its territory is a major irritant to its relations with Central Asian states. These states, whose markets are considered vital to Pakistan's economic growth, are wary that the militants will take their fight to their territory.

The regimes of Central Asia have weathered the forays of the IMU and other jihadist groups in the past. But none are eager to face an enemy that has gained considerable combat experience.

"Whether it is Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan," says Farhatullah Babar, spokesman and speechwriter for Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, containing the militant threat is the predominant issue in their relations with Islamabad.

Babar says that Islamabad is doing whatever it can to eliminate the threat, but its hands are tied by porous borders and mushrooming criminal economies in the region.

"The most essential things that need to be addressed are the control of the movement of militants and the control of their finances," Babar says. "What finances them? We believe that the drug trade is financing them. So we believe that the drug trade should be stopped and the border-control management should be improved so that the militants are isolated and are not able to move freely."

Rashid says it is the weakness of the states themselves that aggravates the threat of the IMU and its offshoots.

"We have seen how Tajikistan is facing enormous poverty, the collapse of the state sector, massive migration," Rashid says. "Kyrgyzstan is under enormous political turmoil. And Uzbekistan remains very repressive and very uncertain as to what the future is of these states. They are very fragile, very vulnerable."