

DEATH OF ISLAM KARIMOV AND THE FUTURE OF ISLAMISM IN CENTRAL ASIA: CASE STUDY OF ISLAMIC MOVEMENT OF UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is deemed as the most lethal terrorist organization throughout Central Asian region. Although it emerged in 1998, its roots can be traced back to the era right after the demise of former Soviet Union. This Movement was created to launch an armed struggle against Islam Karimov's regime in Uzbekistan. IMU, however, could not make solid bases in Uzbekistan and remained engaged in Tajik civil war between 1992 and 1997. After the General Peace Accord of 1997 signed between the rival groups which ended the Tajik Civil War, Uzbek militants had no choice but to move to Taliban ruled Afghanistan. The US led attack in Afghanistan after 9/11 forced the remnants of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan to take refuge in the FATA region of Pakistan. IMU's focus was primarily targeting Western forces in Afghanistan. However, when Pakistani government initiated a military action in FATA against the terrorists in 2004, IMU joined its hands with Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). After this union IMU started its operations in mainland Pakistan and Afghanistan. It also supported Islamists to siege Swat in 2007. From attacks on armed forces bases in Karachi and Peshawar to jail break in Bannu and from attacks on Karachi, Peshawar and Quetta airports to kidnapping for ransom, IMU had played central role in terrorist activities in Pakistan. Similar kinds of activities have been carried out by IMU in Afghanistan as well.

The IMU has least focus on Central Asia for the time being and is more engaged in Afghanistan and Syria. It has joined its hands with global

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Islamic militant organizations. It has close relationship with Islamic State (IS) and majority of its top leadership has joined the later. The death of Mullah Omar has led to the fragmentation of IMU in different groups. One group is pro-Taliban and al-Qaeda while other supports Islamic State. IMU has helped IS to group in northern Afghanistan especially in Faryab and Zabul provinces, which are the strongest hold of later in the entire Central-South Asian region. This paper will discuss the history, objectives and operational capabilities of the IMU. It will also explain the current nexus of IMU with the IS and its impacts on the broader regions of Central and South Asia besides possible future of the group especially after the death of Islam Karimov.

Keywords: *Islamism, Uzbekistan, Terrorism, Islamic State, Central Asia.*

Introduction

The whole region of South and Central Asia has witnessed a continuous insecurity in terms of separatism, extremism, terrorism and religious fanaticism. The last quarter of twentieth century is marked with extraordinary local, regional and global developments in the region. Such developments include rise of Zia to power in Pakistan in 1977, Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, Afghan war of 1980s, insurgency in Indian held Kashmir in early 1990s and demise of Soviet Union and emergence of independent Central Asian states in 1991-92 followed by Taliban rise to power in Kabul in 1996. These developments brought a radical paradigm shift in security dynamics of this region.

The rise of Taliban in Afghanistan and their rule in Kabul not only harbored the militants (once called *jihadis* by the whole world including USA) but created a concert of international *jihadis* in Afghanistan to implement sharia laws in the Muslim lands. When Osama bin Laden moved to Afghanistan in 1998, Taliban distanced themselves from Islamabad, Riyadh and Washington; the soft supporters of the former. Al-Qaeda dominated the Taliban regime and persuaded them to follow their ideology. Mullah Omar and his administration was happy to harbor al-Qaeda chief and his companions. Osama's presence in Kandahar provided further economic, human and weaponry strength to Taliban regime. Like other *jihadi* organizations across the region, Islamists from Central Asia and Chinese Xinjiang also moved to Afghanistan and joined their hands with al-Qaeda.

Most important of such groups were East Turkestan Movement (ETM) which adopted its name East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) later on and militants from Uzbekistan (hiding in Tajikistan at that time) led by Juma Namangani and Tahir Yuldashev. With the help of Osama, these Central Asians constituted a new militant organization named "Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan" (IMU) in 1998 with an aim to topple the "un-Islamic" regime of

Islam Karimov. IMU, however, has remained engaged in Pakistan and Afghanistan most of the times instead of Uzbekistan or any other Central Asian state. After being uprooted from Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) by Pakistan military in 2014 when operation *Zarb e Azb* started, most of the IMU members shifted to Afghanistan. Currently, IMU is concentrated in the Eastern and northern Afghanistan and the areas where Taliban are influential. There are reports that IMU along with other militant organizations have concentrated in the northern Afghanistan and have created local cells of Islamic State (IS).

Background

IMU's roots can be traced back to the early twentieth century when Red Army marched into the Central Asian region, then called Turkestan. The Basmachi Movement¹ resisted the Red Army for about a decade until it was destroyed by Bolsheviks. That armed movement was first indicator against the oppression and injustice in modern Central Asia. Although, religion remained under strict control during the Soviet era in Central Asia, underground teachings of Islam kept it alive in one or the other form notably through *Sufism*. Gorbachev's liberal reforms provided Central Asian population with an opportunity to learn and practice their religions. Soviet defeat in Afghanistan along with Islamic Revolution in Iran and funds provided to the underground and newly established Islamic organizations by Saudi Arabia and other wealthy Arab states generated a slow but gradual process of Islamic revivalism in the region².

Independence of Central Asian states was deemed as a blessing by the common people of the region. They predicted a real and positive change in their lives. On the other hand, old socialist elite continued to govern the independent states. All the presidents elected before independence continued as the heads of the states after independence. They secured their positions through newly created constitutional and legal set ups. They continued with their old styled political and economic policies. They provided people with 'substantial' religious freedoms as well. Despite such freedoms, there were few religious groups which demanded ban on all un-Islamic social practices. Such groups were more active in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan than rest of Central Asia.

Ferghana valley has extreme importance in Central Asian political and religious life. Currently divided into Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, this valley has remained a hub of religious activities in the region. Groups

¹ For details see Fazlur Rahim Marwat, *The Basmachi Movement in Soviet Central Asia: A Study in Political Development*, Peshawar: Emjay Books International, 1985.

² For details see Ahmad Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, Lahore: Vanguard, 2002.

like *Tauba*, *Islami Lashkari*, *Adolat* and *Barka* from Ferghana region of Uzbekistan and Islamic Renaissance Party from Tajikistan came at the forefront and demanded radical changes in the social and political systems. They were supported by secular parties as well to bring political change. *Adolat*³ was at the forefront of such demands. When their demands were not fulfilled, they staged protests and later demonstrations. Situation worsen in Namangan (most densely populated region of Uzbekistan which is part of Ferghana valley) where young people came out in streets and occupied few government buildings in order to implement Islamic laws in a bid to control bribery, corruption, drugs addiction, prostitution and use of alcohol. This was such an alarming situation that president Islam Karimov had to flee to Namangan to negotiate with the Islamists. The negotiations failed as Karimov assured them to put their demands in front of *Majlis* (Uzbek Parliament)⁴ but Islamists wanted to implement their demands at the spot. The tone of Islamists was authoritarian and insulting which was not acceptable to the Uzbek president who had a long and strong socialist background.

Upon his arrival in Tashkent, Karimov ordered indiscriminate crackdown on Islamists. He stated “fundamentalism falsely presents the Islamic religion to the masses as a universal mean to solve all social, economic, political, and international problems”.⁵ According to Islam Karimov the opposition forces “both Islamists and anti-state actors” are not sincere with the state and people of Uzbekistan but their “every slogan and action is backed by a political motivation”.⁶ Karimov while recalling his memories stated that “I went to Namangan and met face to face with those who had lost their minds...they insisted on proclaiming the Islamic state. I still remember those bearded persons, attracting people by raising these

³ Adolat was an offshoot of Uzbek Islamic Renaissance Party (banned immediately after its creation by Islam Karimov). It got split from IRP due to their differences on the strategy to establish an Islamic state. Abdul Ahd, one of the leaders of Adolat and a local imam in Namangan told Ahmad Rashid that we have differences with IRP. Since their struggle is for political power within the existing set up, we do not want to be a part of this un-Islamic political structure. Our ultimate goal is Islamic revolution which is impossible through constitutional impossible. He further stated that Islamization of society will be a gradual process, “We will ensure that first Fergana, then Uzbekistan and then the whole Central Asia will become an Islamic state.” Ahmad Rashid, *Jihad: Op. Cit.*, p.139.

⁴ Abdumonnob Pulot, “The Islamic Revivalism in Uzbekistan: A Threat to Stability”, in Roald Sagdaev and Susan Eisenhower, eds. *Islam and Central Asia: An Enduring Legacy or An Evolving Threat?* Washington D. C.: Washington Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 2000, pp.45-46.

⁵ Islam Karimov, *Uzbekistan at the Threshold of Twenty First Century*, Massachusetts: N.K., 1998, p.27.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.32.

matters. I still remember their (insulting) voices.”⁷ Uzbek legislature immediately enacted a new law on ‘Public Associations’ banning all the political parties based on religion.

The Islamists had already constructed many mosques in the region⁸ which carried slogans like “long live Islamic state.”⁹ These mosques were used for propaganda by religious zealots. The authorities started indiscriminate crackdown and held not only many of the Islamists but secular opposition members as well. Out of those held, many were sentenced to heavy imprisonment. But the real leadership of that insurgency; Juma Namangani¹⁰ and Tahir Yuldashev¹¹ managed to flee the country. Namangani went to Tajikistan to fight against the Rehmanov regime alongside the Opposition forces led by Islamic Renaissance party of Tajikistan while Yuldashev went on a funds collection trip to Muslim countries for Uzbek Islamists.

When the General Accord for Peace was signed between government and opposition forces to end the five years bloody civil war in Tajikistan,¹² Juma Namanagani along with his fighters moved to Gorno Badakhshan area of Tajikistan.¹³ He was living peacefully there until Osama bin Laden arrived in Afghanistan. Tahir Yuldashev who was residing in Afghanistan at

⁷ Islam Karimov, Speech to the Uzbek legislature on 1st May 1998. “Freedom to Profess Faith must be on Lawful Guards”, URL: www.president.uz

⁸ Millions of Dollars were given to the Islamists by wealthy Arab states to construct mosques. Copies of Quran and other religious material were translated into the Central Asian native languages as well as Russian language and were distributed free of cost among the Central Asian citizens.

⁹ Ahmad Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, Lahore: Vanguard, 2002, p.138.

¹⁰ He was a paratrooper in the Soviet Army which invaded Afghanistan in 1980s. Namangani remained in Afghanistan for a substantial time and when he went back from Afghanistan he had already lost his heart to *Mujahedin*. He was a born fighter and not an Islamic scholar. However, he had a huge impression on his followers. For more details see Ahmad Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, Lahore: Vanguard, 2002, pp.137-138 and 143.

¹¹ Yaldashev was a local imam of an underground mosque. He was a brilliant speaker as well.

¹² It is estimated that more than 50,000 casualties and around 100,000 injuries were reported during this war. Almost 1.5 million people were displaced.

¹³ Namangani had very strong hold in Gorno Badakhshan area of Tajikistan. He had close contacts with the local people. There are also reports that he married the daughter of a local strong tribal chief as well. Namangani had close contacts with the Islamists of Tajikistan especially Said Abdullah Noori (founder of Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan) and Hoji Akbar Turajunzode, ex grand mufti of Tajikistan. Namangani remained in the area even after the Civil war ended. He started transport business and farming. However, due to the pressure from government and mediators of the Peace Accord, Namangani was requested to leave Tajikistan. He demanded a safe passage to Afghanistan along with millions of dollars. The Russian helicopters transported him, his family and close cronies to Afghanistan. For details see Adam Saud, “Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan: From Militancy to Moderation”, *Regional Studies*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 2, 2010.

that time got closer to Osama who persuaded the former to establish IMU in order to achieve their goal. Namangani was asked by Yuldashev to move to Afghanistan along with his fighters. Upon his arrival in Afghanistan, IMU was formally established in northern Afghanistan in 1998.

Goals of the IMU

The major goal of IMU was to topple the Islam Karimov regime and to replace it with the one based on principles of *Sharia* laws. “The goal of IMU is to establish an Islamic state under sharia”¹⁴ says Yuldashev in a statement. IMU thinks that when an Islamic system of state would be implemented in Uzbekistan all the problems of common man would be resolved. It would be the responsibility of state to take care of each and every citizen. In a policy document, IMU declared that “their type of Islamic government would have nothing to do with the Islamic political systems of Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan or Saudi Arabia. In fact, our system would be based on the pattern of Islamic state of Madina.”¹⁵

IMU demanded immediate resignation of Karimov which would lead to “a council of top-level *ulema* to draft and pass laws in conformity to Sharia and also select people who will perform the political and executive function. The external relations of the Islamic state would be based on justice and fair play and all the existing treaties with enemies of Islam will be broken and a jihad will be launched against all those states which persecute Muslims.”¹⁶

As Uzbekistan is declared one of the most undemocratic and not-free countries by international organizations, people had no other choice but to support 27 years long Karimov regime. There are lots of reports which confirm oppressive measures by the Uzbek regime to contain its political opponents. Such measures include illegal detention, charge under terrorism act, extra judicial killings and confiscation of properties.¹⁷ “Nobody is free in Uzbekistan. Everything was controlled by Karimov. He was a cruel person. He did not allow any kind of opposition politics. He had appointed his cronies to all the important administrative positions. Corruption is rampant;

¹⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dpiD=cQe-m. Accessed on 10th August 2015.

¹⁵ For details see Ahmad Rashid, *Op. Cit.*, p. 148, see also Vitaly V. Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Between Pen and Rifle*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2005, pp.74-76.

¹⁶ Vitaly V. Naumkin, *Op. Cit.*, pp.74-76. For more details see Ahmad Rashid, *Jihad: Op. Cit.*, p. 148.

¹⁷ For details see US state department’s reports. Craig Murray, *Murder in Samarkand: A British Ambassador’s Controversial Defiance of Tyranny in the War on Terror*, London: Mainstream Publishing, 2006. Urdur Gunnarsdottir, “Uzbek President Re-elected to Third Term in Elections Criticized as Unfair”, *Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 27th December 2012. URL: www.caclanalyst.org/?q=node/4773. Accessed on 12th May 2014.

you even have to bribe to go for pilgrimage”¹⁸ narrates Abduljalil Boymatov, Chairman, Human Rights Commission of Uzbekistan.

Under such circumstances underground Islam has got popularity especially among the young Uzbeks. Along with IMU, Hizb-ut-Tahrir has also got grounds in Central Asia especially in Ferghana valley. Both, Islamists especially IMU and the secular opposition forces had a similar agenda; change of Karimov regime which would definitely be ‘change of system’ now. Nevertheless, all the opposition forces are still not on a single page. There is least cooperation among opposition forces to chart out a single strategy for future political system of Uzbekistan.

Militant Activities in Central Asia

Tashkent witnessed the deadliest bomb explosions after independence of Uzbekistan in February 1999 killing several people besides injuring dozens others.¹⁹ The regime blamed both Islamists and the secular opposition forces for the blasts. Uzbek authorities stated that these attacks were the outcome of meeting between Juma Namangani and Muhammad Saleh, head of *Erk* party of Uzbekistan (living in exile in Turkey) in Istanbul.²⁰ Both Islamists and secular opposition, however, denied the allegations and declared that they have nothing to with the blasts. Regime again started severe crackdown and imprisoned members of Islamist organizations who were sentenced to long imprisonment besides hanging six. The charge list against the accused not only included bomb explosions but robbery, killings and loot etc.²¹ Uzbek president stated that “such people must be shot in the head. If necessary, I will shoot them myself”.²² He further stated that “if my child chooses such path, I myself would rip off his head.”²³

Despite such firm statements by the president, IMU incurred into Kyrgyzstan and then to Uzbekistan in the summers of 1999 from Afghanistan. Few Kyrgyz security officials, three Japanese geologists, four American climbers and a Kyrgyz mayor were made hostages by the IMU members.²⁴ After negotiations and receiving ransom money, the hostages

¹⁸ Interview with respondent via skype on 14th July, 2014.

¹⁹ For details see Ahmad Rashid, *Op. Cit.*, and Craig Murray, *Murder in Samarkand: A British Ambassador's Controversial Defiance of Tyranny in the War on Terror*, London: Mainstream Publishing, 2006.

²⁰ Richard Weitz, “Storm Clouds Over Central Asia: Revival of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, No. 27, 2004. pp. 472-473.

²¹ Ahmad Rashid, *Jihad: Op. Cit.*, p.152.

²² Ahmad Rashid, *Op. Cit.*, p.146.

²³ *Ibid*, p.150.

²⁴ K. Warikoo, ed. *Religion and Security in South and Central Asia*, New York: Routledge, 2011, p.145. See also M. Ashimbaev, ed. *New Challenges and new Geo-Politics in Central Asia: After September 11*, Almaty: Kazkah Institute of Strategic Studies, 2003, p.47.

were released by the militants. It is said that a helicopter was also provided to the IMU militants for a safe exit to Afghanistan.²⁵ During summers of 2000, members of IMU re-entered into Uzbek and Kyrgyz territories. Although, they managed to enter but faced strict retaliation and had to retreat to Afghanistan with heavy casualties. Since Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have weak security apparatus, Uzbekistan and Russia under the umbrella of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) carried military actions in the form of air strikes.

IMU fighters have one aim, 'kill or to be killed'. One of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) soldiers who were deployed there at the time of incursion to protect the border region states "they are crazy and show no mercy. They never surrender and if caught explode grenade which they always carry with them".²⁶ These incursions were done during the Taliban-Northern Alliance fighting in northern Afghanistan. Some of the people opined that such incidents were to bare the Central Asian states not to support Northern Alliance against Taliban regime. Those militants were not only Uzbeks but included others as well. Colonel Ormakoyev, commander of southern region of Kyrgyz security forces confirmed that IMU militant included Central Asian, Uighurs, Arabs, Afghans and Pakistanis.²⁷ There are reports that thousands of Central Asian students got admission in Pakistani and Afghan madrasahs after the independence. These students were quick to join Taliban movement in early 1990s and IMU in 1998.

After an interval of about four years, Tashkent again came under attack when bomb exploded and shootings happened in *Charsu* market in March 2004²⁸. This incident killed six people besides injuring many. Islamic Jihad Union (IJU)²⁹ claimed the blasts and shooting declaring that our ultimate aim is to topple the oppressive and un-Islamic regime of Islam Karimov. In

²⁵ Josie Le Blond, "Analysis: Radical Uzbek Groups Recruiting in Europe", Washington Times, 20th January 2012, URL: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/jan/20/analys-radical-uzbek-groups-recruiting-in-europe>. Accessed on 10th August 2013.

²⁶ Eduard Poletaev, "Islamic Rebels Threaten New Mountain Offensive", Institute of War and Peace Reporting, URL: www.iwpr.net/index.pr?arcmvie/rca/rca_200103_51_1_eng.txt. Accessed on 12th October 2012.

²⁷ Jatin Kumar Mohanty, *Op. Cit.*, p.71.

²⁸ Craig Murray, then British Ambassador to Uzbekistan says that police on that day muster in the green belt instead in the office. Secondly no such damage was seen on the sight which is caused by a suicide bombing.²⁸ He further says that the evidences from the scene showed that explosion was not more than that of a hand grenade. Few people interviewed by Murray confirmed that all it was planted as police fired and killed different people due to different issues. To hide these killings, police planted all this show. For details see Craig Murray, *Murder in Samarkand: A British Ambassador's Controversial Defiance of Tyranny in the War on Terror*, London: Mainstream Publishing, 2006.

²⁹ A splinter of IMU.

July of the same year, American and Israeli embassies along with office of the Prosecutor General came under attack. The embassies came under suicide attacks by females. Human rights organizations question the authenticity of these attacks. They say that the attacks were planted by authorities themselves.³⁰ Craig Murray, the then British ambassador to Tashkent says that the alleged female suicide bombers were real sisters and were picked up by the authorities from their house and were kept at unknown place for a few weeks before the explosions.³¹

Since then, no major IMU offensive has been witnessed in Uzbekistan. However during “October 2010, 28 Tajik soldiers got killed in an ambush with alleged IMU members in Rasht valley.”³² IMU has support in the areas where Namangani used to live during and after the Tajik civil war. Major reason for the support is that Namangani used to help those people financially during his stay over there. In return, villagers used to provide him with intelligence and shelter in case of emergencies.³³ IMU militants still use Tajikistan as transit route from Afghanistan to Central Asia.

IMU’s focus of activities has largely been confined to Afghanistan and Pakistan where it is currently stationed. It remained in the FATA region of Pakistan for about a decade but had to leave after subsequent operations against militants in the area by Pakistani military. Both Tahir Yuldashev and his successor Usman Adil were killed in FATA region by American drones. Many of IMU members joined Islamic State (IS) and went to Syria. "Thank

³⁰ Interview with Abdjalil Boymatov via Skype on 14th January 2016.

³¹ Murray took an interview from the parents of one of the alleged female suicide bombers; they revealed that they had two daughters who were very happy and satisfied university students. One day both of them disappeared. When they did not come back, we registered a report with police the next morning. After a couple of weeks, some SNB personnel came to our house and took away the possessions of the girls. Then after six weeks of their disappearance, an unknown call came and the caller told us that our daughters are unharmed and are currently in the ‘north’. Then after another couple of weeks, another unknown caller told us to reach at a location in Tashkent and onboard a vehicle standing there. That vehicle took us near to presidential palace where we met Dildora, our elder daughter for a brief time.

The only conversation between us was that our daughters are alive and are well cared. Then she fled back in a convoy of five vehicles. Then on the day of bombing, SNB men came at our residence by 2:30 am, took us to a lockup and put us behind the bars without telling us anything. Then by 11:30 am, one of the SNB men told us that our daughters are dead and released us. After three days, Dildora’s body was handed over to us which had one hand burnt and a burnt mark at her stomach ‘as small as a walnut’. There was no other mark on her body while the body of younger daughter was never returned back. For details see Craig Murray, *Murder in Samarkand: A British Ambassador’s Controversial Defiance of Tyranny in the War on Terror*, London: Mainstream Publishing, 2006, p.334-337.

³² Lola Olimova, “Few Tears Shed for Tajik bin Laden”, IWPR, RCA issue No. 647. 5th May 2011. URL: iwpr.net/report-news/few-tears-shed-for-tajik-bin-laden. Accessed on 12th October 2012.

³³ For details of Tajik civil war, see Adam Saud, “Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan: From Militancy to Moderation” in *Regional Studies*, Spring 2010.

the Lord, following the Almighty's will we have pledged our allegiance (Bayaht, or Bay'a) to the Caliphate that has bowed to Islam," Usman Ghazi³⁴ says "And we are now part of it."³⁵ An estimated 1000 Uzbeks have joined the Islamic State in Syria. However, recently most of them are back in Afghanistan and have established a local cell of IS along with other militants notably from Central Asia, Xinjiang and Chechnya.

Activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan

The Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) forced IMU to leave Afghanistan and take refuge in FATA. Juma Namangani was killed in the OEF by American air strikes. Tahir Yuldashev took over as the new leader of IMU and left for FATA. IMU stayed there for a couple of years living peacefully. Nevertheless, local tribes got clash of interests with IMU and warned them to leave their areas. However, IMU did not comply with the warning and a heavy fighting started between the both in 2004. Meanwhile, Pakistan military started an offensive against the terrorists in FATA and IMU was left with no option but to leave to Afghanistan.

It was late 2006 when IMU re-appeared on the FATA scene. This time it aligned itself with Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). In order to keep itself alive and closer to Baitullah Mehsood-TTP chief-IMU carried out many terrorist activities inside Pakistan. Such activities include suicide bombing, kidnapping for ransom and attacks on airports and military bases. In 2007, IMU clashed with local tribesmen in South Waziristan in FATA. This ambush was so intense that 160 IMU militants were killed and around 60 were captured by the locals.³⁶ Attacks on Peshawar, Karachi and Quetta airports were claimed by the IMU. Pakistani security forces also released the photos of those terrorists who were killed in Mehran Base attack in Karachi. They looked very much Uzbeks from their appearance.

384 prisoners, mostly terrorists were freed by the militants when they stormed into Bannu jail in the southern region of Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa (KPK) province on 14th April 2012. The police chief of the region stated that "some of them were the most wanted" and "twenty of them were given

³⁴ The last leader of united IMU. He was killed in November 2015 during an ambush between a group of IMU loyal to Islamic State and Taliban.

³⁵ "Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan", *Global Security*, URL: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/imu.htm>. Accessed on 16th September 2016.

³⁶ Hans-Inge Longo, "Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan: Crackdowns (2005-2010)", 10th March 2011, URL: <http://hegemonicobsessions.com/?p=281>. Accessed on 12th October 2012.

death sentence.”³⁷ IMU was involved in this attack. Prior to this assault, a Naval Base Mehran in Karachi came under attack on 22nd May 2011. Around dozen terrorists entered the base and killed 11 people. Many of the terrorists were killed by the security forces. The photos of terrorists released by the then federal interior minister of Pakistan, Rehman Malik confirmed them as Uzbeks.

It was June 2014 attack on Karachi’s Jinnah International Airport which killed twenty eight people including ten terrorists, forced Pakistani authorities to clearly draw its line towards IMU. In a statement IMU declared that “it (attack) was to avenge the military strikes in Pakistani tribal areas last month which claimed lives of innocent women and children”.³⁸ Full-fledged military air strikes started against militants primarily IMU members in Waziristan area by Pakistan military supported by Pakistan Air force. This operation *Zarb e Azb* was so ruthless and lethal for the terrorists that most of them have either been killed or forced to leave FATA. IMU remnants also left for Afghanistan where they have hideouts in northern Afghanistan primarily.

IMU members belong to multiple states and regions. Besides Central Asians, Afghans, Arabs and Chechens have also joined it. Ismatillah Faizullah, deputy head of the Uzbek mission to Islamabad says that “Uzbeks constitute only 35% of the IMU membership. 65% of its members are non-Uzbeks.”³⁹ Security forces in North Waziristan killed 16 IMU militants who were Turkmen in February 2012. Rahimullah Yousafzai also confirms that IMU is a multi-ethnic and multi-national organization now. Responding to a question regarding the Turkmen as members of IMU he said “yes, Turkmen also fight in Pakistan-Afghanistan border region. They want a change in their lives. They want to get rid of autocratic regimes. Since they don’t have legal opportunity to perform in political matters, they resort to violent activities. They have got an opportunity to achieve their goal by aligning themselves with broader Central Asian Islamist organizations.”⁴⁰

Most recently, one of IMU’s factions alliance with the Afghan chapter of IS is the practical manifestation of Yuldashev’s dream to make the organization a global one. Yaldashev stated that “we are with Shiekh Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda...after taking over Afghanistan and Pakistan (with the help of international *jihadis* based in these states), one part of us will go

³⁷ Fida Aqeel, “Prison Break: Taliban Attack Bannu Jail, nearly 400 inmates escape”, *Express Tribune*, April 15 2012, URL: <http://tribune.com.pk/story/365064/prison-break-militants-attack-bannu-jail-over-900-inmates-freed/>. Accessed on 12th October 2012.

³⁸ BBC, “Karachi Airport Attack: Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Claims Responsibility”, 11th June 2014, URL: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-27790892>. Accessed on 16th September 2016.

³⁹ Interview with respondent in Islamabad on 16th November 2012.

⁴⁰ Author’s interview with the respondent in Peshawar on 9th January 2013.

to India and the other will go to the Central Asian states.”⁴¹ He further stated “this movement does not stop with someone’s death or martyrdom. This caravan will continue...this caravan shed a lot of blood...has suffered a lot...This (Islamic) knowledge and jihad are *amanat* (trust) of Allah for you and Allah will ask about the *amanat*. This jihad should be purely for Allah’s will and not for the kingdom, for nation or tribe... We have this goal that we will establish the Army of *Ummah* and they will only serve the *Ummah*. This special army will only be in the service of Islamic Khilafah. And this will be the Army which will liberate Palestine.”⁴²

In another statement Tahir Yuldashev said that “we must rid the world of infidels. There are no limits for us. Our goal is to take over not only Afghanistan and Pakistan, but the whole world and to re-establish a caliphate as Allah commanded”.⁴³ He further stated that “After 9/11, all *kuffar* (infidels, pointed towards OEF) are bombarding us. Children and women are getting martyred. But we will not leave Islam...Islam is a religion of sacrifice and not a religion of cowards...fighting is nothing for us. Either we become martyred or become ghazi but we will not fight according to plans of *kuffar*... They (enemies of Islam) could cut the branches of this movement, could cut big branches of this movement, but will never be able to uproot it...because most of those who put the foundation for this have long been martyred and we joined the IMU after them.”⁴⁴

IMU once talked about ‘*Ghazwat-ul-Hind*.’ Initiated by IMU and with the help of other Muslim brethren, Islamic state in the whole of sub-continent region will be established, particularly those areas which belonged to Mughal Empire, says Abu Zar al-Barmi, *Mufti* of IMU.⁴⁵ Referring to many civil wars in Muslim African states, Abu Zar al-Burmi stated that the “ultimate triumph is for the mujahedin and that the enemies of Islam will face devastating defeats everywhere.”⁴⁶ IMU is facing the most crucial time since its inception. There are reports that it has dismembered and new factions have emerged in different regions of Afghanistan and Syria. Conditions at home i.e. Uzbekistan is also not suitable for the group.

⁴¹ Abu Bkr Siddique, “IMU Takes Roots in Increasingly insecure Northern Afghan Provinces”, Radio Free Europe/RL. 8/12/10.URL: www.rferl.org/content/imu-takes-roots-insecure-northern-afghan-provinces/2242579. Accessed on 24th March 2011.

⁴² www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dpiD=cQe-m. Accessed on 10th August 2010.

⁴³ Jeffery Thomas, “Transnational Terrorist Networks: The Afghanistan-Pakistan Connection”, Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress, 18th August 2011, p.8.

⁴⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dpiD=cQe-m. Accessed on 10th August 2011.

⁴⁵ Christopher Anzalone, *Op. Cit.*,

⁴⁶ Jacob Zenn, “After Afghanistan, Central Asian Jihadis look to New Theatres”, *Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 31st October 2012. URL: www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5868. Accessed on 23rd December 2012.

Official religious figures, most of the common people especially living in urban centers of Uzbekistan, laws of the land and social conditions of Uzbekistan make IMU least attractive for Uzbek population. The grand mufti of Uzbekistan Usman Alimov denounces the militants and warns general public from such kind of people. In a statement on the occasion of a book (Appeal by the World's Ulema) launch ceremony in Tashkent on 2nd June 2016, he said "we want to shield young people from the influence of extremists...we ask Muslims to be vigilant about such kind of people."⁴⁷ Most interestingly, Hizb ut Tahrir-declared as terrorist organization and banned throughout Central Asia-having same agenda to establish Islamic Caliphate distances itself from IMU. It is also critical to the IMU activities and declares its strategy against the teachings of Islam.

Future of IMU

The above mentioned developments are extremely disappointing for the IMU. After the death of Mullah Omar not only Afghan Taliban has divided their ways, IMU has also been fractured and there are many splinter groups of the organization which are fighting in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Syria. Usman Ghazi has pledged his allegiance to the IS. There are reports that Usman Ghazi has been killed in an ambush between *Wilayat e Khurasan*⁴⁸ and a Taliban group loyal to Mullah Omar in Zabul province of Afghanistan in November 2015.⁴⁹ If Ghazi is killed then there is no one left who can really claim the captaincy of IMU. All of its members are least known in the region and their native countries.

⁴⁷ Maksim Yeniseyev, "Uzbek Ulema Denounce Extremists", *Central Asia News*, 26th July 2016, URL: http://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2016/07/26/feature-01. Accessed on, 15th September 2016.

⁴⁸ After the death of Mullah Omar, supreme leader of Afghan Taliban was officially declared by the group, IMU shifted its focus from Afghanistan and Taliban to IS in Syria. When IMU pledged its allegiance to IS in 2015, most of its members went to Syria and Iraq. However, few members did not give allegiance to the IS and remained close to Taliban. Fractures have also been witnessed in Tehreek e Taliban Afghanistan chapter after the death of Mullah Omar. The faction of IMU which went to Syria and Iraq came back on the orders of Abu Bkr al-Baghdadi and has established the local cell of IS with a name "Wilayat-e-Khurasan." The spokesperson of IS stated on 26th January 2015 that it (IS) will establish "Wilayat-e-Khurasan" in areas of "Afghanistan, Pakistan and other" neighboring regions. For details see ⁴⁸ Nathaneil Barr, "Wilayat e Khurasan Stumbles in Afghanistan", *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 14 No. 5, 3rd March 2016, URL: http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45163&cHash=931cd87e22fd13bd3fa5c5c6ea44a6fe#.V92fSPI97IU.

⁴⁹ Bruce Pannier, "Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Unraveled", *Radio Free Europe*, 28th November 2015, URL: <http://www.rferl.org/content/qishloq-ovozi-islamic-movement-uzbekistan-fractured/27395160.html>, Accessed on 16th September 2016.

Despite these serious blows, IMU still struggles for its survival. Whether along with Taliban or IS (*Wilayat e Khurasan*) it continues its offensives. Its concentration in Northern Afghanistan has many gains. It can pose a threat to the NATO supplies through Northern Distribution Network (NDN), a message to the Central Asian states that it is still alive and operational and it can easily mingle and hide itself in the ethnic Uzbek and ethnic Tajik population provinces of Afghanistan. There are other reasons for the rise of militants in northern Afghanistan which include “less support from the central (Kabul) government, less confidence in local police, less coordination among security forces, and increased local Taliban propaganda.”⁵⁰

Faryab and Zabul are the main regions where IMU concentrates its strength. According to the vice president of Afghanistan, General Rasheed Dostam, leader of the Afghan ethnic Uzbek community, “Whenever the fighting gets tough, it is the Uzbeks who are in the lead...They are fighting our troops at very close range.”⁵¹ But there is a tug of war for supremacy in these regions between IMU and the Taliban group. The later has done serious harm to IMU in Faryab and Zabul provinces. Besides alleged killing of Usman Ghazi at the hands of Taliban in Faryab, most of the IMU fighters have been eliminated from this region. It is said that by eliminating IMU from northern Afghanistan “the Taliban achieved in 24 hours what the Americans were unable to do in 14 years.”⁵² Nevertheless, Faryab could be cleared from all the members of IMU.

After that Taliban-IMU fight, one of the IMU members posted on Facebook that “the Taliban had killed hundreds of IMU fighters in Zabul and had laid siege to remaining IMU militants...This might be our last appearance on the Internet”⁵³ and till then no message has been posted by IMU on the internet. However, there are reports that few splinter groups of IMU are busy in the region. Some are fighting in Syria as well. Central Asian groups engaged in Syria include *Imom Bukhari* Brigade and *Katibot*

⁵⁰ Catherine Putz, “Who Controls Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan”, *The Diplomat*, 15th August 2015, URL: thediplomat.com/2015/08/who-controls-the-islamic-movement-of-uzbekistan/, Accessed on 17th March 2016.

⁵¹ Margherita Stancati and Nathan Hodge, “Islamic State Ally Emerges as Threat to Afghanistan, Central Asia”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 18th August 2015, URL: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-ally-emerges-as-threat-to-afghanistan-central-asia-1439919456>.

⁵² Nathaneil Barr, “Wilayat e Khurasan Stumbles in Afghanistan”, *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 14 No. 5, 3rd March 2016, URL: http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45163&cHash=931cd87e22fd13bd3fa5c5c6ea44a6fe#.V92fSPI97IU.

⁵³ Nathaneil Barr, “Wilayat e Khurasan Stumbles in Afghanistan”, *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 14 No. 5, 3rd March 2016, URL: http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45163&cHash=931cd87e22fd13bd3fa5c5c6ea44a6fe#.V92fSPI97IU.

Tauheed wal Jihad. Besides *wilayat e Khurasan*, *Sodiqdar* group of IMU is engaged in Tajikistan. Members of this group were arrested by Tajik security officials from Sughd and Ghafurov areas. Both the members have confessed that they were on a mission to recruit new members for their group.⁵⁴ The Tajik state security agency says that "we heard of this group (in 2013) when we were investigating 16 suspects in Spitaman and Panjakent districts [also in Sughd Province]. At that time, investigators considered *Sodiqdar* part of an existing movement, not a separate one."⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Negmatullo Mirsaidov, "Tajikistan Cracks Down on New Extremist Group", *Central Asia News*, 23rd August 2016, URL: http://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2016/08/23/feature-01?gclid=CIqPp7GUi88CFcGVGwod6KkNzA, Accessed on 16th September 2016.

⁵⁵ Negmatullo Mirsaidov, "Tajikistan Cracks Down on New Extremist Group", *Central Asia News*, 23rd August 2016, URL: http://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2016/08/23/feature-01?gclid=CIqPp7GUi88CFcGVGwod6KkNzA, Accessed on 16th September 2016.

Conclusion

The death of Islam Karimov will not give any leverage to IMU in Uzbekistan as departure of Karimov has not changed the security apparatus and religious policies in Uzbekistan. The interim president Shavkat Mirzo had remained very close to Karimov and is likely to continue his style of government. According to Abdujajil Boymatov, “he (Shavkat Mirzo) is more brutal than Karimov.”⁵⁶ Most of the Uzbek political scientists like Nasrullah Qayyamov, Allakhverdiyev and Kamaluddin Rabimov have declared IMU as the least security threat to Uzbekistan. They say that since the movement has negligible support in the country, how it can be successful here. The leadership especially Namangani and Yuldashev has died. The new leadership of Usman Ghazi is inexperienced and simply means that IMU is out of fighters. Moreover, dilution of non-Uzbek membership has also lost its significance among Uzbek public. There are an estimated number of 1500-2000 fighters left with IMU and if we consider Ismatillah Faizullah’s statement true, it means Uzbek members are only 500-550. Having such a small number of indigenous membership, IMU cannot achieve its objective to create an Islamic state in Uzbekistan.

The ideology of IMU also does not suit to the current social and economic set-up of Uzbekistan. Majority of Uzbek public does not want political Islam to be implemented in their society. They are happy with the existing social system.⁵⁷ IMU has assessed its strength in Uzbekistan and knows it very well that it will not be able to penetrate deeply in Uzbekistan. Therefore, they have shifted their focus from Uzbekistan to Afghanistan especially where it can regroup, reorganize, and strengthen itself to chart out a new future strategy. In order to live in Afghanistan it must have good relations with Taliban and al-Qaeda but at the same time it is looking towards IS in the region.

Although, IMU had fragmented and it seems that IMU does not pose any immediate or near future real threat to Uzbekistan, it, nevertheless, would remain a constant headache to the Central Asian states. Islam Karimov had very wisely controlled the whole Uzbek socio-economic and political system in his hands through his secret agency. It was his style of government that most of the political opponents whether secular or religious are in exile. IMU may intensify its activities in Uzbekistan and may give a tough time to the new regime but no statement has yet been issued by any of the group of IMU on Karimov’s death. IMU may be assessing the situation and may be waiting for the results of the upcoming presidential elections. Till then it will remain in Afghanistan and if gets chance will also try to

⁵⁶ Interview with Abdujajil Boymatov via Skype on 14th January 2016.

⁵⁷ Author had been to Uzbekistan during August 2013 and had informal discussions with the general public from almost all strata of life.

penetrate into Pakistan. But one thing is obvious, since IMU does not have capabilities to operate independently, it sides with the powerful and winners. It seems that it has rented its services to any of the militant organization which can pay it more and has no future in Uzbekistan.

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