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The Islamic Jihad Union

On the Internationalisation of Uzbek Jihadism

Guido Steinberg

The Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), founded in 2002 after splitting off from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), has been trying since 2007 to boost its public image. Unlike the IMU, the largest militant organisation in Central Asia, it advocates the internationalisation of the “Holy War” and has joined forces with the Taliban in Afghanistan and with al-Qaida on the global level. It is a young and small organisation and together with al-Qaida has been training volunteers from Central Asia, Pakistan and Europe in the Pakistani region of Waziristan. Although so far the IJU seems to have had little influence in its native Uzbekistan, it has managed to recruit a group of Turks and Germans, some of whom planned attacks in Germany in 2007. It is still too early to speak of a trend, but should the IJU and al-Qaida succeed in recruiting greater numbers of young Turks and Germans of Turkish origin, the likelihood of attacks in Germany will increase.

In early March 2008 the Islamic Jihad Union announced on a Turkish website (www.sehadetvakti.com), that Cüneyt Ç., a Turk born and living in Germany, had carried out a suicide attack on American and Afghan troops in the Afghan province of Paktika. The website showed pictures of Ç. while training. This announcement marked the first peak of an intensive public relations campaign that the IJU began in 2007. In a bid to gain access to new recruits and funds the IJU has tried to present itself on the Internet as a transnational organisation with supporters in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Europe. At the same time, since the arrests in the Sauerland town of Oberschledorn in the German state of North-Rhine Westphalia in September

2007 [of those suspected of planning bombing attacks on targets in Germany] the IJU has come under great pressure. In October the Pakistani army launched an offensive against Uzbek fighters in Mir Ali in North Waziristan, where the IJU has its headquarters. In January 2008 the IJU's liaison to al-Qaida, the Libyan Abu Laith al-Libi, was killed by a missile fired from an American drone in Mir Ali as well. Several members of the IJU were also killed in the attack.

A Splinter Group of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

Some members of the IMU had already rejected the line followed by its leadership which still primarily targets the Karimov

regime in Uzbekistan in 2001. In 2002 they founded the more internationally oriented IJU, which follows the global Jihad of al-Qaida.

The IJU still maintains close contacts with its mother organisation, the IMU. Until 1998 the IMU had its headquarters in Tajikistan, but subsequently relocated to Afghanistan, at that time still governed by the Taliban, after it was subjected to increasing pressure in Central Asia. In the summers of 1999 and 2000 its fighters infiltrated to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan from Tajikistan.

During the invasion of Afghanistan, starting from October 2001, the IMU suffered massive losses, and its leader Juma Namangani was killed. Under the leadership of the religious-political head of the organisation, Tahir Yoldashev, its remaining members retreated from northern and central Afghanistan to the Pakistani side of the Afghan-Pakistani border zone. Today they continue to operate mainly from South Waziristan.

Even before the loss of its base in northern Afghanistan there were differences of opinion in the IMU about the organisation's ideological and strategic direction, which ultimately led to the IJU splitting off from the main organisation. One of the main issues in the dispute was whether the IMU should continue to limit its activities to combating the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan or whether they should be extended to the whole of Central Asia, or even, like those of al-Qaida, to western states as well. In summer 2001 it initially looked as if the internationalist camp would gain the upper hand. The Central Asian media reported that the IMU had changed its name to Islamic Party of Turkestan (Hizb-i Islami Turkestan) and was working to bring about an Islamic revolution in the whole of Central Asia. This report was, however, quickly denied by the IMU leadership which emphasised that the organisation was continuing to focus only on Uzbekistan. Also in the following years it appeared as if the Uzbek nationalists within the IMU had managed

to prevail. Nevertheless, the fact that most members of the organisation came from the Fergana valley meant that it had an international component as well. Mainly inhabited by ethnic Uzbeks, it was divided in the 1920s between the three Soviet republics Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The division brought about a complex mixture of territories and ethnic groups, the main reason why Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have also become targets of the IMU. The IMU is thus actually more of a liberation movement for the Fergana valley, fighting the three ruling regimes there, rather than a purely Uzbek organisation.

Nevertheless, after 1998 the IMU moved closer to more globally oriented groups like al-Qaida. This was due partly to the nationality of its recruits: along with Uzbeks who form the majority of fighters, Kyrgyz, Tajiks and a few other Central Asian nationalities started affiliating with the IMU. These were joined by Chechens and Uighurs from the Chinese province of Xinjiang, who together with the IMU and the Taliban fought the Northern Alliance in northern Afghanistan. Had the organisation focused its efforts entirely on Uzbekistan it would have risked losing the support of non-Uzbeks. In addition, by operating together with the Taliban, its Pakistani sympathisers and al-Qaida's Arab fighters the IMU strengthened the feeling of solidarity between the different nationalities. Tahir Yoldashev responded by devoting more of his speeches publicised on the Internet to conflicts outside Central and Southern Asia, declaring that the IMU supported the struggle against the West in Chechnya, Iraq and Palestine. But this seems to have been mainly propaganda, for elsewhere in his messages, Yoldashev repeatedly emphasised that the IMU's primary aim was to overthrow the regimes in the Central Asian states of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and that it had not renounced its original goals in Central Asia.

Consequently, the IMU's supporters only occasionally participated in the campaigns of the Taliban and its Pakistani and Arab

supporters in Afghanistan—even though in the meantime it had relocated its headquarters near the Afghan-Pakistani border. Instead, since 2006/2007 the IMU together with its local ally Baitullah Mehsud has fought mainly against the Pakistani government. Mehsud, a local Pakistani supporter of the Taliban, was designated as the leader of the Pakistani Taliban movement in December 2007. Since then he has stepped up his campaign against the Pakistani state and has been held responsible for attacks outside the Pashtun tribal areas in central Pakistan. Because Mehsud is its most important local supporter, but also because the Pakistani army has already launched several attacks on the IMU's bases in Waziristan, the organisation is backing Mehsud's anti-Pakistani strategy. Yoldashev confirmed this in a video message in January 2008, in which he called for an intensification of the "Holy War" against the Pakistani security forces.

An Internationalist Ideology

In June 2007 the Uzbek Najmiddin Jalolov, who is purported to be the leader of the IJU, outlined the ideology and aims of the IJU in an interview that appeared on Turkish websites. In the interview Jalolov explained that the IJU was still intending to overthrow the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan but that this was only one of the organisation's goals and that its main area of combat in 2007 was Afghanistan. He said the IJU was trying to coordinate its activities there with other Central Asians and fighters from the Caucasus. In addition the IJU was striving to spread the Jihad throughout the world in order to liberate Muslims from the tyranny of the infidels. This struggle would only end when Islam ruled the world.

Although the vision of a war that will only end when all Muslims live in Islamic states already indicates differences with the IMU, it is the practical realisation of these ideological principles that makes the more internationalist nature of the IJU most apparent. In July 2004 members of the IJU

(which then still called itself the Islamic Jihad Group) staged suicide attacks on the Israeli and US embassies and on the office of the attorney general in the Uzbek capital Tashkent. These were not only the first attacks on western targets but also (in combination with related bombings in Tashkent in spring 2004) the first suicide attacks in Central Asia. Some of the attackers were apparently trained in Waziristan. Since then other attacks on western states and their allies have been planned.

The Alliance with al-Qaida

In the years that followed the organisation strived mainly to consolidate its base in North Waziristan. The IJU probably has no more than 100 to 200 supporters. Most of them are from Uzbekistan, but they also include Tajiks, Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, and it also cooperates closely with Chechen and Uighur militants. Since the much stronger IMU also has a presence in Waziristan, until 2007 the IJU had major problems establishing a profile of its own. It has tried to achieve this by actively supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan and by maintaining close links with al-Qaida.

For al-Qaida and the Taliban the IJU is a much more attractive ally than the IMU, because it has given its unconditional backing both to the campaign against foreign troops in Afghanistan and to al-Qaida's global Jihad. The liaison figure between al-Qaida and IJU was Abu Laith al-Libi, one of Bin Laden's most important field commanders, who was killed in early 2008. The IJU has confirmed that during the air attack on Libi, whom it refers to as "our Shaikh," a number of its members were also killed. Libi cultivated particularly close ties with the Taliban and was also a kind of Central Asia representative for the al-Qaida leadership. He was one of a new generation of operational chiefs who have played a key role in al-Qaida's resurgence since 2005. Libi seems to have led the intensification of the IJU's activities since the end of 2006. A cell of Pakistani IJU members were reported

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to have been arrested in November 2006 because they were planning rocket attacks on government targets in Islamabad. The IJU leadership in North Waziristan is said to have trained those who were to carry out the attacks, supplied them with weapons and issued them with orders. The situation seems to have been very similar regarding the German-Turkish group arrested in North-Rhine Westphalia in September 2007. They and other suspects were trained in IJU camps in Waziristan and later received their orders from the IJU leadership and from al-Qaida in Pakistan.

Following the enormous pressure to which the IJU was subjected by the Pakistani army and the US from October 2007 onwards, it began its unprecedented public relations campaign on its Turkish-language website.

An Uzbek-Turkish al-Qaida?

The fact that the IJU is using a Turkish website testifies to its successful recruitment of Turks and Europeans of Turkish origin. The setting in which the Sauerland group operated was dominated mainly by Turkish Jihadists. Turks from Turkey and Uzbeks are related Turkic peoples and speak similar languages. An Uzbek organisation that operates transnationally and takes an internationalist line is therefore ideally suited for recruiting Turks. For some time already, Turkish Jihadists have sympathised strongly with the cause of the Chechens and Central Asians. Al-Qaida, on the other hand, continues to be an organisation dominated by Arabs, which to date has failed to recruit Turks in any large numbers. It therefore regards a partnership with the IJU as an opportunity to rectify this deficit. This would strengthen the trend, observable since 2003, that al-Qaida is increasingly transforming itself from the primarily Arab organisation that it still was in 2001 into a global organisation that is even recruiting Pakistanis, Kurds and an increasing number of European Muslims.

Whether the IJU can continue this trend depends strongly on how things develop in the so-called Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan. The elimination of Libi on Pakistani territory shows that the United States is prepared to risk conflict with the government in Islamabad in order to prevent the Jihadists from becoming still stronger in these areas. In addition the IJU is an extremely small organisation, which could, after some major setbacks like the one it suffered in January, rapidly disappear from the scene again. Its biggest advantage is that it enjoys the support of the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaida, and it currently seems to be in a position to continue operating and training in North Waziristan.

Whether the IJU can establish a new terrorist network dominated by Uzbeks and Turks and maintain it in the longer term remains to be seen. Its membership is still very small. But the events of 2007 have given a clear warning signal. If Uzbeks and Turks continue to increase their role in international terrorism then it will primarily be Germany, alongside Turkey, that will be affected.