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**Research Report**

## Escalation in the Kunduz region: Who are the insurgents in Northeastern Afghanistan?

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## Escalation in the Kunduz Region

Who Are the Insurgents in Northeastern Afghanistan?

*Guido Steinberg / Nils Wörmer*

Although approximately 5,000 US soldiers were transferred into Northern Afghanistan in the first half of 2010 and there have been initial military successes, the intensity of the insurgency in the Kunduz region has not diminished. Instead, there has been a continuing escalation of violence there in recent months. The unabated strength of the insurgency is based primarily on highly diversified leadership and logistical structures. The insurgency in the northeast consists of several groups, which follow different strategic objectives, but maintain close tactical cooperation. The main groups are the Afghan Taliban, the Islamic Party of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Additional groups include the Haqqani Network and al-Qaeda. It is important to assemble precise information about the ideological and strategic characteristics of these groups as only then can effective military action be taken and only then can decisions be made about which groups must be approached as negotiation partners.

Compared with 2009, the number of insurgent attacks has risen considerably in Afghanistan's northeastern provinces of Baghlan, Kunduz and Takhar. According to a study by the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO), there was an increase in the number of incidents occurring over the first nine months of 2010. In Kunduz, this figure had increased by 39 percent compared to 2009, in Takhar by 95 percent, and in Baghlan there was a full 140 percent increase. These numbers emphasise that neither the deployment of American forces in the German-controlled area nor adjustments made in July 2010 to the German approach for combating the insurgents were successful in stemming an escalation

in the insurgency that has been apparent since 2006.

In the Kunduz region (cf. Map, p. 8) three Afghan organisations are carrying out operations – the Taliban, Hezbe Islami Gulbuddin (HIG, English: Islamic Party of Afghanistan Gulbuddin Hekmatyar faction), Haqqani Network – and as many as three transnational organisations are active – Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), al-Qaeda, Islamic Jihad Union (IJU). The particular strength of the insurgents in northeastern Afghanistan lies in the variability of their cooperation and their highly diversified leadership structures and logistics. Accordingly, the flow of personnel, weapons, equipment and money, as well as the

transfer of know-how, all move across structures and along paths that are independent of one another. This enables the insurgents to quickly and effectively compensate for severe losses.

Evidence of the diversity within the insurgency can be found in the killing of the long serving governor of Kunduz, “Engineer” Mohammed Omar on 8 October 2010. Engineer Omar was killed in a mosque in his hometown in Takhar Province during the Friday prayers by previously planted explosives. Although German officials viewed him as a highly controversial figure, his six and a half years in office made him the longest serving provincial governor in Afghanistan and Germany’s most important partner in the Kunduz Province.

The governor’s death was a great success for the insurgents and the timing could not have proven more opportune: in 2010, a number of the Taliban’s “shadow governors” in Kunduz and Baghlan had been captured or killed. Now the insurgents had shown that they were also in a position to carry out targeted eliminations of individuals of key importance to their enemy. This assassination, moreover, occurred at a time when they had supposedly just been weakened by loss of local commanders.

It is improbable, however, that the Taliban was responsible for this attack. For one thing, Takhar Province is home to only a very small Pashtun minority of less than ten percent of the population, which has meant that the Taliban has thus far failed to secure a real foothold in the area. In addition, the Taliban did not claim responsibility for the attack although in the preceding months it had pointed in its propaganda to the importance of Takhar Province and it claimed responsibility for a number of attacks in the region before and after the governor’s assassination. It is more likely that responsibility lies with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which is particularly active in Takhar.

An analysis of the phases of the insurgency in Kunduz makes it possible to determine how what was once a local movement

has rapidly become incorporated into the Afghanistan-wide insurgency and its leadership structures, while at the same time maintaining its individual groups and characteristics.

### **Phases in the Kunduz Insurgency**

In 2006, the insurgency erupted full force in Afghanistan’s southern and eastern regions. Three groups constituted the main players: the Taliban led by the so-called Quetta Shura in the southern and eastern provinces, the Haqqani Network in the southeast and the Islamic Party of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in the east and northeast.

Until 2007, these groups solidified their structures in the country’s southern and eastern reaches and succeeded in causing ever greater problems for Afghan security forces and ISAF troops. This created the necessary conditions for expanding the insurgency. Afghanistan’s northern region, which until then had been comparatively quiet, increasingly fell under the scope of the insurgents.

It was possible for the insurgency in the Kunduz region (Kunduz Province as well as portions of Takhar and Baghlan) to escalate, because the three main players in the insurgency in the northeast – the Taliban, the HIG and the IMU – were able to fall back on structures and networks that had already existed prior to the military intervention led by the Americans in 2001 and the fall of the Taliban regime. The potential for recruitment is considerably higher here than in other regions in the north.

Starting in 2007, the Kunduz region quickly became the most important battleground in the Afghan North. The actions of the insurgency in this area generally achieved the tactical and technical level of activities in Southern and Eastern Afghanistan after a one to two year delay.

**The “Bad Kunduz” Phase (End of 2001–2005).** In late 2001, the USA and the Northern Alliance, its Afghan ally, crushed the political and military structures of the

Taliban and IMU. The survivors had to flee to Pakistan or remote areas in Southern and Eastern Afghanistan. Following the return of its leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar from his exile in Iran to the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2002, the Islamic Party became the first group to begin rebuilding its structures in the Kunduz region and start launching attacks during this phase.

German troops were stationed in Kunduz from the fall of 2003 after the ISAF started expanding its operating range into the provinces. The German Federal Government and the public believed that the dangers facing the German troops in North-eastern Afghanistan would be calculable. The phrase “*Bad Kunduz*”, referring to a health resort, began making the rounds.

**Building Phase (2006/2007).** For insurgents in the Kunduz region, the years 2006 and 2007 were a building phase. First, local Taliban elements reorganised themselves in Kunduz and Baghlan, and somewhat later IMU groups followed suit (in Kunduz and Takhar). The Taliban, HIG and IMU became slowly, but progressively more active. This phase was characterised by attacks using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and hit-and-runs. The insurgents mostly attacked from a distance (using missiles, rocket-propelled grenades, or mortars) and avoided direct confrontation.

Starting in 2007, suicide bombers were increasingly employed – an indication that the local insurgency in the northeast had become closely linked with the insurgents in Afghanistan’s southern and eastern regions. Even today, most suicide bombers are recruited, trained and financed in AfPak border region. They are transported by smuggler networks from this area to the location of their planned attack.

**Escalation Phase (2008/2009).** Starting in 2008, the insurgents began funnelling markedly greater quantities of fighters, equipment and financial resources into Northeastern Afghanistan. The IMU became

increasingly visible and the Taliban incorporated local Pashtun groups into its structures, subject to their military leadership councils in Quetta and Peshawar. As a result, the security situation in the Kunduz region dramatically worsened in 2008 and 2009 as the insurgency escalated.

Starting in the second half of 2008, the insurgents began executing complex IED attacks in addition to suicide bombings and rocket attacks. This included, for example, the combination of IEDs with ambushes or attacks by suicide bombers. During 2009, the insurgents gradually departed from their tactic of avoiding open combat with ISAF forces. Since then, they have shown in several engagements that they are continuously developing their technical, tactical and logistical abilities.

At this point, the insurgents began executing coordinated operations (albeit with temporal and spatial limitations) and making use of elements of infantry warfare. This includes early stage and ongoing enemy reconnaissance, fighting from prepared locations, the deployment of reserve forces and logistical support during ongoing engagements.

**The “American Phase” (2010).** Starting in early 2010, US forces mounted a massive intervention against the insurgency in Northern Afghanistan. Since Germany initially took no action to adopt the new American strategy in the area where its troops are deployed – a strategy, which among other things foresaw a more offensive approach following a massive increase in troop levels – the USA sent 5,000 soldiers to Northern Afghanistan to combat the insurgency. Of these 5,000 new soldiers, approximately 1,400 are permanently stationed in the Kunduz region.

Since March 2009, the USA had deployed special forces to Kunduz, which succeeded in inflicting painful losses on the insurgency. Over the course of 2010, the Americans captured or killed several of the Taliban’s “shadow governors” in Kunduz and Baghlan. In late September 2010, Moham-

med Amin, the Taliban's deputy governor and commander of an IMU group, was killed in Takhar. The multiplied efforts of US troops, however, were unable to halt the escalation.

With a new approach it started implementing in July 2010, the German Bundeswehr also partially abandoned its previous restraint in combating the insurgency. The Bundeswehr increasingly operates using mixed German-Afghan units and has concentrated more than ever on the training of Afghan security forces. The mixed units primarily execute infantry operations in critical regions like the restive Chahar Darreh District southwest of the city of Kunduz.

## Who Are the Insurgents?

### Taliban

Most of the local Taliban groups disbanded in the winter of 2001/2002, but the existing networks remained intact. This enabled the Taliban to regain a foothold starting in 2005, at the latest, with the help of local followers. The German troops in Kunduz failed to appreciate the reestablishment of these structures.

The stated objective of the Taliban, which continues to be led by Mullah Omar is to rebuild the "Islamic Emirate", which existed from 1996 until 2001. Sharia Law, as interpreted by the Taliban, would form the basis for the administration of justice and for social life in this state. For this reason, the Taliban has sought to establish state-like parallel structures in the contested provinces. These structures are led by so-called shadow governors in the north-eastern provinces and districts. The Taliban's institutions are often more effective than those of the Afghan state. From 2007, the Taliban temporarily controlled several districts in Kunduz where they administered justice and collected taxes and tariffs.

The Taliban, which constitutes the strongest insurgent group in the Kunduz region, is an almost exclusively Pashtun

movement. Their northern stronghold is the province of Kunduz, where Pashtuns account for approximately 40 percent of the population. Taliban recruits include both local fighters as well as those from other parts of the country, particularly Southern and Eastern Afghanistan – on all hierarchical levels.

Kunduz occupies a position of particular importance in the collective consciousness of the Taliban. In 1997, the Taliban succeeded in taking the city when several local Pashtun commanders (including leaders of the Hezb-e Islami) switched allegiances and joined the Taliban with their militias. At the same time, however, the Taliban was suffering major defeats in Northern Afghanistan. For about a year, Kunduz was the only urban centre over which the Taliban maintained control. The city was surrounded by Northern Alliance troops for a long period of time and, at times, was provisioned by the Taliban via airlift. The only thing saving the Taliban from defeat was the support of the local Pashtun population. Kunduz later became a bridgehead from which the Taliban conquered broad portions of Northern Afghanistan.

The traumatic events of 2001 seemed to carry even greater importance for the Taliban. By late November 2001, Kunduz was the only city besides Kandahar that had not capitulated to the Northern Alliance. In addition to Pashtun fighters and members of Pakistan's intelligence agency ISI, there were also many Pakistani, Arab (al-Qaeda) and Central Asian volunteer fighters in Kunduz. A large number of these were flown out by Pakistan's air force shortly before the capitulation. Many of the people that remained fell victim to a massacre perpetrated by Rashid Dostum's militia, which at that time was allied with the USA.

A number of subsequent Taliban commanders, including Mullah Dadullah, who was killed in May 2007, and Mullah Baradar, who was captured in Karachi in February 2010, participated in the fighting in Kunduz and sought to regain the city. It is no coincidence that Mullah Baradar

was one of the commanders who bore the greatest responsibility for the escalation of the insurgency in Northeastern Afghanistan that started in 2006.

Kunduz Province has gained strategic importance for the Taliban. Since 2009, one of the most important NATO/ ISAF supply lines has run from the border with Tajikistan in the north through the province to Baghlan and Kabul. It has been the Taliban's objective to disrupt transportation along this road. By expanding the insurgency to areas beyond the Pashtun heartland, the Taliban has also been able to demonstrate the weakness of the Karzai government.

### **The Islamic Party (HIG)**

The Islamic Party (Hezb-e Islami) is tailored largely according to its leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who originates from Kunduz. The group has been in Northeastern Afghanistan since the late 1980s and today can be considered the second strongest insurgent group there. The HIG is also a Pashtun organisation, but has its roots – unlike the Taliban with its rural and tribal character – among urban and non-tribal Pashtuns. Hekmatyar exercises an authoritarian influence on the organisation, which has a leadership structure similar to leftist revolutionary parties. The HIG has defined hierarchical structures, decision-making bodies and a political programme. Since 2008, its political wing is also officially recognised as a political party in Afghanistan. While this political wing denies any form of cooperation with Hekmatyar, it is probable that he exercises control over all elements of the organisation.

In the 1980s, under Hekmatyar's leadership the HIG became one of the most influential mujahidin groups and received military and financial support from the USA, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Since the late 1980s, it has also been one of the strongest actors in Kunduz and it played an important role in the city's politics until 1997. It controlled, for example, the district

of Chahar Darreh, which is plagued by turbulence today.

It was not until 1997, when the Taliban began attacking Northern Afghanistan and Hekmatyar fled to Iran, that the Party's importance began to rapidly recede. The majority of the HIG leadership and fighters in Kunduz joined the Taliban. Nevertheless, the old networks remained intact and many HIG functionaries retained their offices under Taliban rule.

When Hekmatyar returned from exile in 2002, this made it easier for him to re-establish an independent and powerful group, which cooperated with the Taliban and fought against foreign troops. The group is primarily active in the country's eastern reaches and has repeatedly attracted attention for its sophisticated military operations. These include a failed attack on President Hamid Karzai in April 2008 and an ambush in August of the same year in which ten French soldiers were killed in the province of Kabul.

Today the status of the armed wing of the HIG within Afghanistan's landscape of power is far lower than what the party could boast until the mid-1990s. Yet, up to a third of the country's provincial governors and numerous functionaries within the Karzai administration's administrative apparatus are considered former members, followers or sympathisers of the HIG.

Although the HIG is currently fighting on the same side as the Taliban, there are clear distinctions in their objectives. Hekmatyar advocates for a modern Islamic state – he viewed the Taliban's Islamic Emirate as too backward-looking. The fact that both organisations ultimately stand in competition with one another has been repeatedly demonstrated by local disputes, most recently in bloody battles in Baghlan in March 2010.

### **The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)**

In exchange for the Taliban's acquiescence, the IMU, an Uzbek organisation founded in 1998 in Afghanistan, has provided the Tali-

ban with hundreds of Uzbek, Tajik, Kyrgyz, Chechen and Uyghur fighters each year for the struggle against the Northern Alliance. In 2001, the IMU military leader Juma Namangani was named by Mullah Omar to be the commander of a unit of foreign fighters consisting of many Central Asians as well as Pakistanis and Arabs. This “Brigade 21”, which is said to have included more than 3,000 fighters, operated in the country’s northern region.

At that time, the IMU’s most important bases were located in Kunduz and Takhar, where they enjoyed the support of local Uzbeks and Tajiks. In Kunduz, Uzbeks make up around 15 to 25 percent of the population, and in Takhar they comprise approximately 40 percent of the population. Since strong connections exist between the local Uzbeks and Tajiks and Central Asia, the area was an ideal base of operations for the IMU. With the loss of these bases in the fall of 2001, the IMU lost any possibility of reaching out militarily to Central Asia.

In late 2001, the IMU suffered considerable losses in the fight against the Americans and the Afghan Northern Alliance. Hundreds of Central Asians were killed including Juma Namangani. The rest of the organisation retreated to Pakistan under the leadership of their emir, Tahir Yoldashev. The Central Asian fighters found refuge among Pashtun tribes in South Waziristan. Despite its losses, the IMU with its ranks exceeding 1,000 fighters represented the strongest foreign contingent in Pakistan’s tribal region.

Originally an Uzbek organisation, the IMU had set the objective of toppling the regime of President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan. For some years now, the organisation has been following an agenda with a more transnational focus in line with the example set by al-Qaeda. Since 2008 its fighters have been increasingly active in Kunduz and Takhar, where the IMU has become one of the most powerful groups alongside the Taliban and HIG. Even today, the IMU continues to receive support from

ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks living in these areas.

Over the course of 2008, the IMU sent experienced trainers from Pakistan and established a new underground infrastructure in Kunduz and Takhar. By 2009, there were numerous IMU fighters active in the region, primarily in Kunduz. The organisation’s increased levels of activity in Tajikistan can also be seen as a warning sign.

The broader public did not become aware of the IMU’s presence in the Kunduz region until the spring of 2010. On Good Friday, IMU fighters were involved in a spectacular attack on a Bundeswehr patrol, resulting in the deaths of three soldiers. This attack as well as others demonstrated the military abilities of the IMU fighters. Since the 1990s, they have been considered the elite soldiers of the jihadist movement.

There are likely three reasons for the IMU’s efforts to regain a foothold in the Kunduz region. First among these is the mounting pressure the IMU has been under in South Waziristan since early 2007. Since then, there has been an increase in the number of Pakistani and US attacks. In October 2009, Pakistan’s army launched an offensive in South Waziristan against the Pakistani Taliban and the IMU, which resulted in the IMU having to relinquish its strongholds.

Secondly, the IMU hoped to establish a springboard in Northern Afghanistan from which it could access Central Asia. Kunduz and Takhar are prime targets for this objective due to the IMU’s close contacts with local Uzbek residents.

Thirdly, the IMU has expressly stated anti-European and anti-German motives. This was evident, for example, in a video from IMU leader Tahir Yoldashev in March 2009 in which he pointed to the European Union as “Islam’s worst enemy”. The IMU views the EU and Germany as accomplices to the Karimov regime. In addition, Germany has become an opponent due to its presence in Northeastern Afghanistan.

### **Haqqani Network, Islamic Jihad Union and al-Qaeda**

Aside from the Taliban and the HIG, the Haqqani Network is the most important insurgent group in Afghanistan – and the group with the closest contacts to al-Qaeda and the Uzbek Islamic Jihad Union. The network, however, is only sporadically active in Kunduz and is considerably weaker than the Taliban, HIG and IMU.

Originally, the Haqqani network operated primarily in the provinces of Paktia, Paktika and Khost (“P2K” in military jargon) in Eastern Afghanistan. This is where the Pashtun Zadran tribe is settled, the tribe to which the Haqqani family belongs. Haqqani is principally concerned with having control over this region. The organisation’s fallback area is in Pakistan’s North Waziristan, where al-Qaeda and the IJU also have bases.

Haqqani has gained particular prominence because since 2007 he has expanded his range of operations beyond P2K to include Kabul. Most of the spectacular attacks in the capital can be traced back to the Haqqani Network – including the attacks on the Indian embassy and the Serena Hotel in 2008. The Network benefits from al-Qaeda’s know-how, since its fighters co-operate closely with the group.

In the Kunduz region, the Haqqani Network primarily supports Zadran Pashtuns, who were relocated in the 1920s to Kunduz. The initiative spurring this cooperation, however, appears to have come more from the side of these relocated Pashtuns than from Haqqani itself. When local Zadran Pashtuns decided to participate in the insurgency, they turned to Haqqani with whom they have close relations going back to their original territory near Khost. They were provided with assistance in the form of training and funding. Due to its limited clout, the Haqqani Network seems to only act in concert with other insurgent groups in Kunduz.

It was in this fashion that the Haqqani Network, al-Qaeda and possibly individual fighters from the Uzbek Islamic Jihad Union came to Kunduz. This latter organi-

sation is a small splinter group of the IMU, which pushed for an internationalisation of the struggle at an earlier point than the rest of the group.

Al-Qaeda, on the other hand, operates in the Kunduz region – as in Eastern Afghanistan – in more of a support role. Cells of three to four persons work primarily to transfer terrorist know-how, but also smuggle suicide bombers into the region.

### **Making Use of Rifts among Insurgents**

The German Federal Government has often failed to properly assess the factors and indicators associated with the escalation in the security situation of the Kunduz region, let alone identify them at an early stage. This is due to limited knowledge of the ideological and strategic distinctions between the groups participating in the insurgency. But it is particularly evident in light of the negotiations currently being sought and the reconciliation process that such knowledge is of fundamental importance.

The insurgent movement in the Kunduz region is more divergent than that in any other Afghan region. Knowledge about the different objectives and the social and ethnic recruitment bases of the participating organisations must be used to a much greater extent than it has been in the past to guide the military response as well as talks with the insurgents.

Military action should be used first and foremost to combat the transnational organisations (al-Qaeda, IMU, IJU) as well as Afghan insurgents controlled from within Pakistan. Local insurgents from Kunduz among the ranks of the Taliban, HIG and the Haqqani network, on the other hand, must be provided with alternatives to armed combat, for example jobs and reconciliation programmes. Furthermore, land ownership conflicts and unresolved refugee issues, which have primarily affected Pashtuns, must be addressed. This alone will prevent members of this segment of the



population from being recruited to the insurgency.

If serious negotiations with the insurgent groups emerge on the national level (thus far, there have only been preliminary discussions), arrangements need to be made in the provinces. In order to identify appropriate local partners, it is absolutely vital that there is precise knowledge of the geographic and ethnic origins of the groups operating in the Kunduz region as well as their connections to organisations like the Taliban, HIG, IMU and Haqqani network. While it may seem like a banal point, this pre-requisite to a targeted policy in the Kunduz region continues to remain un-

fulfilled after a seven year German presence in the region.

An additional important condition for the success of the two-pronged strategy based on fighting and negotiations is that the USA and its allies must not give the impression that they will quickly withdraw. After all, since the US government announced that it would draw down troop levels in 2011, the insurgents have believed that pressure from the Americans will drop off starting in 2011. It should hold for the USA as well as for Germany that their troops should not leave the country until the Afghan state has the capacity to actually take on responsibility for the country's security.

### Map

#### Afghanistan and its Northeastern Provinces in a Regional Setting

