Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
A Strategy of Survival in Afghanistan-Pakistan Region
Re-shift of Focus to Central Asia

By: Sayed Mujtaba Hashimy

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Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is one of the few foreign militant groups operating in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. The group is associated with al-Qaeda, and the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban. IMU is known as a disciplined organization with die-hard and experienced cadre. Its origin goes back to the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union when it grew under the leadership of Tahir Yaldashev, a young Mullah and Juma Namangani, a former Soviet paratrooper out of a religious movement called Adolat (justice). IMU was designed towards the goal to establish an Islamic state in Uzbekistan. However, immediate military measures undertaken by the Uzbek government urged IMU to seek sanctuaries in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime in late 1998. For it to survive and remain relevant, the group had to promote the goals of the local militant factions in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.

The survival strategy led IMU to be exploited by local militant and transnational terrorist factions. When IMU sought sanctuaries in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime for its 600 members, the Taliban willingly provided it and IMU leadership had to take oath of loyalty to the Taliban leader Mullah Omar as Amirul Momineen and its members to fight alongside the Taliban against Northern Alliance. While in Afghanistan, IMU came in close contact with al-Qaeda and it was gradually influenced to subscribe to al-Qaeda’s global jihad movement. Both the groups benefited from each other- al Qaeda from IMU’s military capabilities and IMU from al-Qaeda’s vast financial network across the Arab World.

Following the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001, IMU confronted a new wave of challenges. It sustained heavy human losses alongside the Taliban in the US-led invasion and felt compelled to retreat to Pakistan. There the group, to ensure sanctuaries for itself, had to fight war on two fronts- joining the Pakistani Taliban against the Pakistani government and the Afghan Taliban against the Afghan government and the US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan. The former helped the group to build a foothold for itself in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan despite opposition from the Pakistani government, local population and even certain elements within the Pakistani Taliban in FATA. Under U.S. pressure, Pakistani government directed several military operations to drive out foreign militants including IMU from the FATA region. Operation Al Mizan in June 2002 and operation Kalosha II in March 2004 were conducted for this purpose. But the Mehsud faction of the Pakistani Taliban, IMU and other foreign militants fought on and held their grounds.
Despite the hardship it faced and the dependence it had on the local militant groups, IMU built its image as a die-hard, disciplined and a significant militant group in Afghanistan-Pakistan region. It has been behind some of the remarkable suicide attacks on the US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan and indigenous security forces in the Afghanistan- Pakistan region. On 19 May 2010, IMU executed a suicide attack on Bagram, the largest US airbase in Afghanistan. On 04 April 2012, it executed a suicide attack that killed 12 people, including three ISAF troops in northern Faryab province. On 19 October 2013, another IMU suicide attack targeted the ISAF convoy near Bagram airbase in killing several American and Afghan soldiers. The group claimed two of three suicide attacks in Panjshir, the most secure province in Afghanistan. It included the suicide attack on Panjshir governor house in which five IMU members were involved. And In Pakistan, IMU on June 11, 2014 executed coordinated suicide attack on Jinnah International Airport in Karachi that killed at least 18 people, including 11 security personnel. Two months later, the group launched similar attacks on two Pakistani airbases in Quetta in conjunction with the Pakistani Taliban, which killed 35 security officials, destroyed one ammunition depot and two fighter aircrafts. Attacks of such magnitude display the military ability of IMU and significance of the group to both Afghan and Pakistani Taliban.

However, IMU did not make a single incursion into Central Asia since 2001. This could be a tactical move by IMU, probably prioritizing to consolidate its foothold in Afghanistan-Pakistan region by engaging with local militant. The current relevance the group achieved and the foothold it created in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region points towards the deliberate shift of focus from Central Asia especially Uzbekistan for short term.

Now that the US-led withdrawal from Afghanistan is underway, there is likelihood that IMU will re-shift focus to Central Asia as a prime area for its operations. During the security transitioning from NATO to the Afghan security forces from July 2011 to June 2013, IMU expanded operations to a number of provinces in north and northwest of Afghanistan. It has been behind increasing violence in Badghis, Faryab, Takhar, Badakhshan and Kunduz provinces- all of which share border with Central Asia. Security in Faryab province, for example, after the security transition in May 2012 got steadily worse and locals in this province attributed it to increase inflow of the IMU fighters. On October 16, 2014, the leader of Jundullah a chapter of IMU was killed following an airstrike in Badakhshan province. All this could be an indication of increasing presence of IMU in the northern provinces and its gradual pivot to Central Asia in the years to come.
IMU is now an important group in the broader theater of terrorism. IMU’s exit from Uzbekistan in 1998 rendered the group dependent upon other Islamist entities but its strategy since 2001 helped the group not only to survive but also to become a battle-hardened group. It now remains a more serious threat to Central Asia particularly Uzbekistan. Its lost of former leadership and close links with transnational militant groups paved the way for a more radical cadre to be in reins with transnational agenda to pursue. They now not only dream of establishing an Islamic state in Uzbekistan but also subscribe to Caliphate campaign across the Muslim world bringing the whole of Central Asia into the new mandate of IMU.

_Sayed Mujtaba Hashimy serves as Research Analyst with Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies (CAPS), Kabul. His research area covers security and terrorism in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region._

Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies  
**Main Office**  
Darul Aman Main Road  
Phase # 06 Karte Sae  
Street # 09 House No 577  
Kabul, Afghanistan