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New Confusion About ISKP: A case study from Sar-e Pul

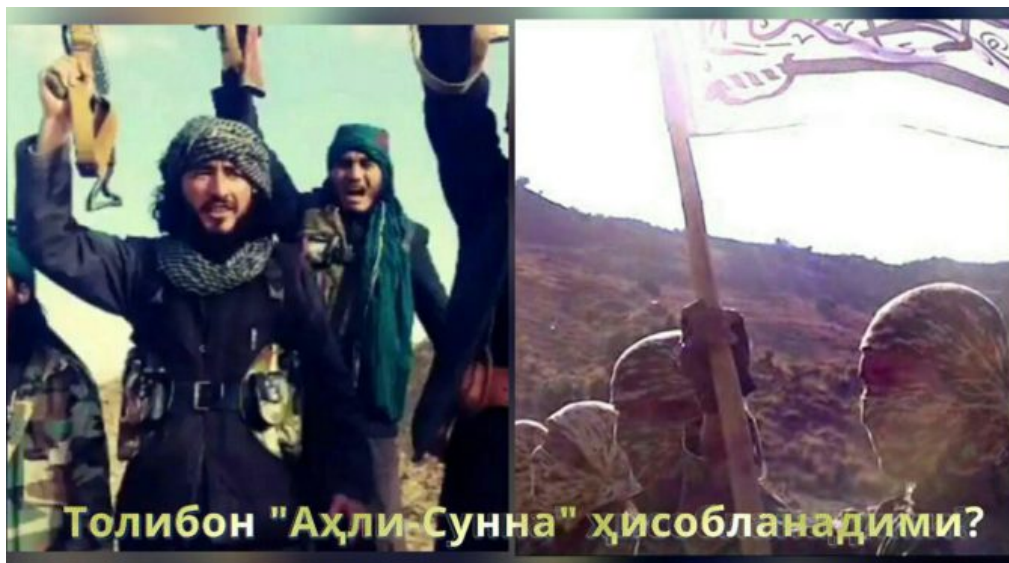
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After the defeat of a self-proclaimed ISKP group in Jawzjan in July 2018, focus has shifted to neighbouring Sar-e Pul. Russian media in particular have alleged that there are more pro-ISKP groups active in this province. AAN's Obaid Ali (with inputs from Thomas Ruttig) has looked into Sar-e Pul's insurgency landscape and found no indication of any group associated with the IS or its Afghan franchise, ISKP. There is, however, a small number of Central Asian fighters who operate alongside the Taliban movement under the label 'Islamic Jihad Union (IJU)'.

There is no evidence in Sar-e Pul province of the presence of any group affiliated to the Islamic State (IS, locally called "Daesh") or its recognised branch in Afghanistan, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). These findings are the conclusion of a short AAN survey of security sources, local officials and civil society activists, both in Sar-e Pul and Kabul, to check claims of recent media reports, mainly emanating from Russia, that such groups are present in this province. These reports also quickly spread on the internet (see one of the reports [here](#)).

Mawlawi Naqebullah, head of the provincial High Peace Council and who knows the insurgency's dynamics in Sar-e Pul well, told AAN that there was no evidence of ISKP's presence in the province. Masuma Ramazan, a provincial council member in Sar-e Pul, said there were some foreign fighters in remote Kohistanat district. Their nationality, affiliation and number, she said, are unclear. According to her, certain locals refer to this group as having links



with ISKP but others just call its members “Uzbekistani”, ie originating from Uzbekistan. One civil society activist from the province, Haji Payenda, told AAN that some social media activists talk about ISKP in the province. But, he said, “It is fake news.”

After the defeat of a self-proclaimed ISKP group in Jawzjan in late July 2018 (AAN analysis [here](#)), some locals spread reports that these self-proclaimed ISKP fighters had fled to Sar-e Pul province. In fact, all the Afghan fighters among the group surrendered to the Afghan government, while the foreign fighters, mostly Central Asians, surrendered to the Taleban. According to various sources close to the Taleban in northern Afghanistan, 19 foreign fighters including 14 Central Asians surrendered to them. The Taleban claim they moved them to Faryab province and that they were still in their custody.

Confusion surrounding black flags, again

The apparent cause for the confusion is a small number of around 25 Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) fighters and 15 family members, mentioned by Mahsuma Ramazan, who have been operating alongside the local Taleban in Sar-e Pul since 2015. These fighters entered Afghanistan after the Pakistani army’s military operation, named Operation Zarb-e Azb, in northern Waziristan in 2014. Several local sources told AAN that the majority of these fighters were of Uzbek ethnicity and from Uzbekistan. Their exact number is unclear.

Nur Agha Nuri, a provincial council members representing Kohistanat district, told AAN that the Taleban’s shadow provincial governor Mawlawi Ataullah provided shelter for them in Sufak, a remote village in the south of that district. Kohistanat, a remote district itself, fell into the Taleban’s hands in June 2015.

These IJU fighters are part of an independent front named ‘Imom Buxoriy Katiba’ (Imam Bukhari’s Battalion) that the IJU has established in northern Afghanistan. The Imam Bukhari Battalion (in the transcription that would be used in Afghanistan) also operates in some parts of Badakhshan and Takhar provinces in the northeast of the country. It is named after a famous Central Asian second Islamic/ninth Christian century religious scholar who authored one of the most important *hadith* collections, called *Sahih al-Bukhari*.

Sar-e Pul, a remote province in the northwest, is highly contested by the Taleban. They control half of the province, largely its western and southern parts and some areas of the southeast: apart from Kohistanat parts of Sayyad, Balkhab and Sancharak districts. Most of the Taleban posts in those areas are run by local Afghan Uzbeks and Tajiks (read our previous analysis [here](#)).

IJU, a global jihadist group and an ally of the Taleban, displays a black flag similar to that of ISKP’s, but with a different logo. The IJU flag has the sentence, “There is no God except Allah and Muhammad is his messenger,” the profession of faith for every Muslim, with a sword at the bottom. The ISKP’s black flag has the first part of this sentence in the top-half of the flag and the second half of the sentence in the lower half inside a white circle. Confusing both flags,



some locals see the IJU as an ISKP-affiliated group (see AAN's reporting on similar confusions of small insurgent groups with IS/ISKP from 2014 [here](#)).

Who is IJU?

IJU was founded by Islamic fundamentalists from Central Asia. Until 2002, the group operated within the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an umbrella militant group for Central Asian fighters that joined the Taleban's Emirate in the 1990s. Regarding its affiliations in Waziristan, the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI) [wrote](#) in a 2009 research paper that the group "appears closely connected [and] to cooperate closely with a group of Arab fighters which was led, until his death [in 2008], by the al-Qaida-affiliated Abu Laith Al-Libi," one of Bin Laden's most important field commanders, and with the Haqqani network. In June 2015, IJU was [added](#) to the United Nations Security Council Sanctions List as being associated with al-Qaeda and the Taleban. The US Department of State designated it a "global terrorist group earlier, in 2005" (read more [here](#)).

Between 2007 and 2009 while still in Waziristan, the group allegedly accommodated European, particularly German, jihadist fighters, and was accused of having planned terrorist attacks in Germany (media reports [here](#): and here, in [German](#)).

The IJU online

The main sources for IJU activities and reports are social media where the group frequently releases statements and videos. IJU produces high quality propaganda videos featuring both the Taleban's and the Central Asian fighters' activities in the north. AAN has been tracking militant groups in northern Afghanistan over the past few years. IJU seemed to be the most active foreign militant group in Afghanistan fighting alongside the Taleban and with its active presence on social media.

According to these social media sources, IJU has frequently taken part in military operations with the Taleban, fighting against Afghan security forces. According to the Kavkaz Centre, a pro-jihadi website based in Chechnya, Haroun Abu Muhammad, introduced there as one of the group's military leaders, stated "When we plan for a joint operation sometimes the Emirate provides us with ammunition, shelter and food" (read the interview [here](#)). In December 2015, IJU released a video showing its fighters attacking an Afghan security forces' convoy in Badakhshan province. It also showed "Muhammad," an IJU commander, instructing fighters how to target the Afghan forces.

IJU's main social media channels are Badr al-Tawhid and al-Sadeqin (or al-Sodiqar in Uzbek, meaning 'The Truthful'). Both channels are run by IJU but for different purposes. Badr al-Tawhid releases videos featuring both the Taleban and IJU on the battleground, while al-Sadeqin focuses on religious scholars' speeches on jihad. It is unclear whether the IJU's social media channels are run from Afghanistan or from abroad. The group's Facebook page, which has a lot of followers in Afghanistan, is sometimes blocked but then quickly reactivated. The



group also regularly uses other social media channels, such as Telegram.

IJU occasionally podcasts Taleban videos, from 'Voice of Jihad', the Taleban's official website, as well as speeches by religious scholars with Russian transcripts.

What does the Sar-e Pul IJU group do?

The IJU group in Sar-e Pul largely offers military training for the newly recruited local Taleban in the province. It offers basic military training such as shooting rifles and how to target Afghan forces' check points. IJU's limited number of fighters in the province as well as the fact that they are in a remote area makes it difficult for them to take an active role in the fighting in this province.

Some members of the group, according to sources close to Taleban, have longstanding military experience. They also bring their own interpretation of religious values from Northern Waziristan, mostly focusing on global jihad. This is an issue infrequently raised by the local Taleban. "Taleban and locals called them Ustad (teacher)," said sources close to Taleban.

More recently, in October 2017, Badr al-Tawhid, released a video featured training exercises allegedly carried out in northern Afghanistan. The video contained physical training in a compound and shooting rifles. The fighters are also seen practising how to storm buildings, clear rooms and take hostages.

Another IJU video collection released by al-Sadeqin apparently filmed in Sar-e Pul province is named 'Voice of the People' ('Sada-ye Mardon' in Dari) and features the Taleban's takeover of Kohistanat in 2015. In this collection the group interviewed a number of locals in the district. One interviewee is filmed saying that "men, women and children" in the province support the Taleban. Another interviewee, a Taleban fighter, points to a military vehicle and weapons seized from the Afghan security forces.

Conclusion: the IJU is a staunch Taleban ally

IJU's presence alongside the Taleban in some parts of the North, including Sar-e Pul, as well as the group's circulation of Taleban or pro-Taleban videos on the internet show that both organisations maintain a strong connection.

Looking at IJU's activities and its small number of fighters, the group does not represent a serious threat to Central Asian states so long as it remains in its alliance with the Taleban. By far the smaller of the two groups in this alliance, it cannot go against Taleban policy and practice, which is *notto* operate in neighbouring states but concentrate on regaining control in Afghanistan. Even if the Taleban are involved in smuggling activities across the Tajik border, which can lead to cross-border violence (see a report about an incident in Darqad district in Takhar province in late August, [here](#)), this is part of the war economy and therefore substantially different from the kind of threat IS tries to project against regimes in the region.



The Taliban's larger presence and their strong resolve to prevent ISKP's infiltration into northern Afghanistan leaves limited potential space for the ISKP to establish a foothold in Sar-e Pul. IJU's pro-jihad campaign on social media as well as its efforts for global jihad, however, might attract newcomers from abroad. But IJU would not be able to host them or facilitate fighters of militant groups hostile to the Taliban in northern Afghanistan. Therefore, Sar-e Pul remains a province free of ISKP fighters. IJU is a Taliban – and not an IS/ISKP – ally.

Edited by Thomas Ruttig