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Non-Pashtun Taleban of the North (4): A case study from Jawzjan

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The Taliban have put in place administrative and military institutions in northern Jawzjan province that function relatively well. The shadow administrative posts are held by local non-Pashtuns. The recruitment of Uzbeks, in particular, has proved effective for the Taliban. However, Daesh's appearance in this Uzbek-dominated province has created concerns, not only for the local government, but also for the Taliban. The Taliban, so far, have failed to fully block Daesh's infiltration among the Turkic community in Jawzjan, but have contained it. AAN's Obaid Ali explores the presence and capacity of Daesh to stand against the Taliban, the reasons for their infiltration, and the challenges the Taliban face in opposing it.

This dispatch is part of a series on the non-Pashtun Taliban in the north (for Tajik Taliban in Badakhshan, [read our previous reporting here](#), for Uzbeks in Takhar, Faryab and Sar-e Pul [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

On 21 August 2017, the Taliban assaulted the Khamab district centre and quickly overran the government compounds in the town (see media report [here](#)). The militants seized governmental buildings, such as the district governor's office, and the main bazaar of the district, for almost half a day. When reinforcements from the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) arrived and airstrikes were carried out, the Taliban withdrew from the district centre and the Afghan security



forces returned to their positions.

Speaking to AAN, a local elder said that the government forces retreated with little resistance. However, local officials claimed that, after a few hours, the ANSF mounted a counter-attack and pushed the Taliban back from the district centre. According to the provincial police chief, now the district is under security forces control again (read short report [here](#)). Engineer Ahmad, the district governor, when speaking to AAN, said the Taliban were still located in villages near the district centre and it was feared they might target it again.

The repeated fall and recapture of Khamab district centre raised serious questions for locals as it was not the first time that the centre had fallen into Taliban hands. In December 2014, for instance, Khamab district [fell](#) entirely into Taliban hands. The Taliban seized the district centre again for ten days in October 2015, until the first vice president Abdulrashid Dostum led [counteroffensives](#) against them.

Khamab is just one example of how security in Jawzjan has deteriorated to such an extent that other district centres have also regularly changed hands between government forces and militants. In June 2017, the militants overran the Darzab district centre, seizing governmental offices for a few days. According to provincial security officials, the ANSF conducted a large-scale clearance operation, pushing the militants back (read short report [here](#)). However, as Muhammad Dawar, the district governor, said that 98 per cent of Darzab district continues to be controlled by militants. He told AAN that the security forces only control the Afghan National Police headquarters and the district governor's compound; the remaining areas are all under the militants' control. As a result, he said, "the governmental offices are removed to the provincial centre, Sheberghan."

When considering the current security dynamic, the militants have made significant inroads in Jawzjan, which borders Turkmenistan in the north. As in Darzab, the government presence in Qushtepa is also limited to the government offices in the district centre, while militants rule the remaining parts. Rahmatullah Turkestani, the provincial police chief of Jawzjan, admitted to AAN that militants largely controlled both districts in the southwest of the province. He said that, as in Khamab, the government and Taliban both hold half the territory in Qarqin district. According to the police chief, five other districts are also heavily contested by the Taliban: Aqcha, Faizabad, Mangijik, Muradian and Khaniqa. Aqcha, the second largest city in the province, has been "under siege" by the Taliban since mid-August, according to an Afghan media [report](#). On 18 September, the security forces started a large scale counteroffensive to push the Taliban back from villages around Aqcha district centre. They claim that so far 15 villages have been cleared from Taliban presence. The operations continue (media report [here](#)). Furthermore, the provincial police chief said, security forces have been engaged simultaneously on several battlegrounds in the northeast and southwest of Jawzjan province. Meanwhile, Khwaja Duko and the district around Sheberghan city, he said, are relatively calm and under government control.

Militancy in Jawzjan



The Talebaninroads into this Uzbek dominated province are, in fact, part of the movement's strategy to localise the warfare by offering positions to local non-Pashtuns, as AAN has already described for other provinces in the Afghan north (read our previous analysis [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). It has been a priority for the insurgents to recruit from the Turkic communities and to appoint local commanders from them to help run their war-machine.

The Taleban promoted Mawlawi Abdulrahman in 2016, to a position as a member of their leadership council. This increased the number of Turkic speakers with the council to two; the first one being Sheikh Qasem – a Turkmen from Jawzjan. Mawlawi Sunnatullah, an Uzbek, who served as group commander during the Taleban regime in the 1990s, was announced as shadow provincial governor for Jawzjan in 2017. When the Taleban re-established their presence in the province in 2009, Mawlawi Sunnatullah had returned to Darzab, where he gathered a group of 20 to 25 fighters who were mainly operating here and in neighbouring Qushtepa.

Currently, Mawlawi Sunatullah leads more than 800 fighters in the province. Local, young, Uzbek, educated religious figures, lead the Taleban shadow administrative and military committees. Qari Ghani, an Uzbek from Qushtepa district, for example, leads the shadow financial committee, while the military committee is led by Mawlawi Ahmad Shah, an Uzbek from Faizabad district, and the judicial committee by Qari Hafiz, an Uzbek from Aqcha district.

These two districts, as well as Aqcha district, to the south and northeast of Sheberghan respectively, were the first areas of activity for the post-2001 insurgency in the province. More active pockets of insurgency were seen in 2010, just a few kilometres from the provincial capital; both near the highways connecting Mazar-e Sharif and Sheberghan (to the east), and Sheberghan and Faryab (to the west). This made the routes unsafe for travel (for more background read [this AAN's 2011 report](#) on the insurgency in the north, p53). (1)

The Taleban leadership council's recruitment efforts among the Turkic communities have produced effective results. This has ensured, not just the Taleban's presence, but it has also generated fighters loyal to the movement. This is part of the long-term strategy by the leadership council to ensure adequate manpower and financial resources at a local level. The Taleban tasked influential Uzbek and Turkmen figures, who had rejoined the movement in 2004, to implement this strategy and to help revive the militancy among the Turkic community in the northwest.

The recruitment was pursued through two main avenues. First, it started with young Uzbek madrasa students in Pakistan. This was carried out through Uzbek religious scholars, who taught at madrasas in Pakistan. One of them was Sheikh Abdulbari, an Uzbek from Darzab district. During the Taleban's Emirate, in the 1990s, Abdulbari served as a mid-level military commander in the north and later led a religious school, Madrasa-ye Faruqia, in Kabul where it was not only Uzbeks that used to study there. After the fall of the Taleban regime, he fled to Pakistan where he continued serving as a madrasa teacher. According to sources in Pakistani madrasas, Sheikh Abdulbari mainly targeted Uzbek students, providing them with



accommodation and food.

The first group of young, Pakistani, madrasa-educated Uzbeks were deployed to the north in 2009. They all became mosque preachers in Aqcha, Muradian, Khanaqa and Khamab districts. From there, they started a campaign against the government.

First, they criticised the activities of the government; later calling it a 'puppet of foreigners'. The government watched this for four months and then put most members of the group in jail.

Second, secret Taliban delegations often visited former mid-level Taliban commanders from the northwest to muster them to take up arms again and fight against the government. According to sources close to the Taliban, Mawlawi Abdulrahman (an Uzbek from Faryab), Hafiz Nurullah (a Turkmen from Jawzjan), Mawlawi Abdulsalam Hanafi (another Jawzjani Uzbek), who was the Taliban deputy minister for education and, therefore, one of the highest-ranking Uzbeks in the regime, all frequently visited the northwest to mobilise fighters, as well as to instruct local commanders on the ground.

They were able to utilise the already existing small pockets of opportunistic Uzbek commanders, who were loyal to no particular group, until and as long as sustainable financial resources were channelled to their pockets. Some of those commanders served as Taliban group commanders and fighters in the 1990s, while others were locals with criminal backgrounds. The restarting of the Taliban movement in the area prepared the ground for these actors to label themselves as fighters of the insurgency in order to access financial resources. These resources were obtained, either at the local level (through taxation and other revenue), or the payments came from the leadership council budget.

However, this did not happen without problems. For example, there were small-scale internal struggles over taxation and revenue collection among the Taliban commanders in the province from 2009 and until 2013 when the Taliban leadership council insisted their field commanders document revenues collected from locals and report this to the financial committee of the movement. The Taliban assigned influential and loyal commanders to oversee the income flows. Mawlawi Abdulrahman, for instance, was authorised to lead the insurgency in the northwest, as well as making the field commanders accountable. This was a Taliban attempt to reach two objectives: to oversee the income of resources and to prevent opportunistic groups from taking advantage to prevent local commanders from establishing private fiefdoms outside of their control.

Mawlawi Abdulrahman managed to implement successfully the Taliban leadership council's strategy of recruiting large numbers of fighters and commanders from the Turkic communities. He also prevented irregularities among the insurgents and made sure there was more accountability in their operations. However, when it came to financial resources, he struggled. Some local commanders refused to document their revenue collection in order to keep a larger share of it for themselves. In 2014, for instance, a number of field commanders did not transfer the collected revenue to the provincial shadow financial committee. This elicited a tough



response from the Taliban who, according to sources in the movement, for example, disarmed or even expelled disobedient commanders.

Daesh branding as an opportunity

The Taliban's efforts to prevent irregularities, as well as getting a better hold on income resources, has created an environment of mistrust among field commanders. The Taliban provincial leadership's obvious failure to fully control those income flows opened up a competition, which, sometimes, has turned into open disputes and quarrels among local Taliban commanders as to who should keep control over certain territories to raise income through taxation and revenue. The appearance of Daesh in this situation – both in the international, as well as in the Afghan arena – provided the commanders with an outlet they could turn to when they did not want to adhere to Taliban discipline.

Their Taliban superiors repeatedly accused Qari Hekmat and Mufti Nemat, field commanders in Jawzjan and in Darzab and Qushtepa, respectively, of irregularities, harassment of locals over taxation and misuse of their authority. Qari Hekmat had served as the shadow district governor in Darzab, and Mufti Nemat as the head of the Taliban military committee for Darzab and Qushtepa districts.

In 2014, according to locals, Qari Hekmat developed a conflict over collecting revenue with another local field commander, Qari Aman, known as Shamsullah, an ex-deputy Taliban shadow governor for Jawzjan. Both are Uzbeks from the Darzab-Qushtepa area. Locals told AAN that, eventually, both commanders disappeared for a short while as they went to Pakistan to discuss the issue with the leadership council. Both returned after a few months, but Qari Hekmat was removed from the Taliban's ranks in the province. According to local journalists, the Taliban spokesman told them that Qari Hekmat was no longer a Taleb commander in the province. They say he told them "the Taliban are not responsible for his activities in Jawzjan."

At the same time, the appearance of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) fighters in Qushtepa district opened a new chapter for Qari Hekmat. IMU is an organisation that was a former Taliban ally, but one that had shifted allegiance to Daesh in 2015 ([read our previous analysis here](#)). This provided the opportunity to shift allegiance and the Qari immediately pledged allegiance to Daesh. In 2015, he started to target, not only the Afghan security forces, but also those commanders within the Taliban movement in Darzab district who had now become his enemies. Over the past two years, he has successfully managed to shape his unit as a Daesh-associated group and has received several delegations from the core Daesh base in Jalalabad province.

In 2014, the Taliban leadership council also expelled Mufti Nemat from the Taliban ranks. When he visited Pakistan in 2013, he was accused of corruption and misusing his authority and kept in custody there.

After his release that same year, he initially went a different way to cope with his ejection from



the Taliban. To present himself as a convert to Daesh provided Qari Hekmat with an easy cover to settle his score with his ex-comrades in the Taliban movement and to remain in power in the area under his control. In contrast, Mufti Nemat joined the peace-process hoping to gain access to government resources (see short video [here](#)). When he returned to Jawzjan, he decided to surrender to Dostum with some 200 fighters (read media report [here](#)). Mufti Nemat stayed in Sheberghan for almost two years hoping to join the ALP or pro-government militia forces in the province. As a follower of Salafism, he intended to expand the Salafi ideology in the province at the same time. In November 2016, he established a Salafi madrasa called E'ya-ye Sunnat (Rehabilitation of the Sunnah) in the city and where male and female students attended classes. This created concerns among the dominant Hanafi Sunni scholars. Both sides engaged in a serious public debate about the interpretation of certain religious subjects. Eventually, the provincial department of the Ministry of Hajj issued an order to shut down Nemat's madrasa. In November 2016, the madrasa was closed and Mufti Nemat banned from teaching in the province. He then reached out to Qari Hekmat and also joined the Daesh-affiliated group in Darzab.

In the case of Jawzjan, it was power-saving opportunism more than it was ideological motivation that seemed to play among commanders and their fighters to link up with Daesh. According to local sources, the Salafi ideology is a core motivation among Daesh fighters in eastern Afghanistan ([see AAN analysis here](#)) but has limited followers here. According to Muhammad Rasul Mujahaz, head of the Ulama Council in Jawzjan, Salafism only appeared recently in the province. "There was no Salafi mosque or madrasa, only in Darzab district a small group of Salafis attempt to promote the ideology."

The appearance of Daesh has created a serious challenge for how the local Taliban handle disgruntled commanders. According to Taliban sources, a number of delegations from the Taliban side were sent to meet Qari Hekmat and to assure him a position and authority in the province; an offer he rejected. Simultaneously, Daesh also courted him. Hekmat received several delegations from their side, too. In 2016, for instance, the Taliban detained a five-member Daesh delegation that tried to reach Qari Hekmat and were killed by local Taliban. In revenge, Qari Hekmat fighters captured and killed ten Taliban members. In August that year, another high-level delegation from the Taliban side, including Mawlawi Abdulrahman, Sheikh Abdulbari, Hafiz Nurullah and Abdulkhaleq reached Qari Hekmat to encourage him to rejoin the Taliban. According to Taliban sources "the discussions left no impact."

Conclusion: A three-way struggle

The emergence of Daesh as a second insurgent group in the northwest and its attempts to establish a footprint among the Turkic communities has created serious concerns for the local government, as well as for the Taliban. The local conflict constellation is now a triangle with Daesh as its weakest side. Governments in neighbouring Central Asia are watching this development with concern as a potential threat to their countries.

Daesh's emergence presents an unprecedented outlet for Taliban commanders who either do



not want to subordinate themselves to the stricter discipline of the Taliban movement or want to keep their local fiefdoms free of too much outside interference. On the other hand, this is a rather dangerous option for them, as such shifts of allegiance often is followed by a strong Taliban reaction. According to locals from the north, in a number of cases, local Taliban even eliminated suspected commanders for fear of them shifting their allegiance to the new group.

Nevertheless, Daesh constitutes a challenge to the Taliban recruitment strategy among the non-Pashtuns. They see the danger of losing followers to the new group, particularly those who have a strong local base. But, so far, they have tried to keep the conflict at a low profile. Ethnic sympathy among the Uzbeks, to which both sides belong, might contribute to this kind of approach.

This is reflected by Qari Hekmat's case, where the Taliban used a soft, political approach to win him back by negotiations. So far, the Taliban have not taken serious action against Qari Hekmat. This is largely because the Taliban want to avoid invoking infighting among the local Uzbeks; not least because it would make media headlines, which would be against their desire to tackle the issue at the local level. They also fear this could drive more of their commanders to Daesh.

The overwhelming presence of the Taliban in most districts of Jawzjan, as well as in the wider north, so far prevents potential Daesh sympathisers to openly join the ranks of the "Islamic State Khorasan Province."

Also, the government has failed so far to take advantage of the three-way conflict by winning over disgruntled Taliban commanders. Already earlier, a number of Taliban field commanders, who had 'joined the peace-process', went back to the Taliban given its failure to ensure security and job opportunities for those who change to its side (read media reports [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

Edited by Thomas Ruttig

(1) A German journalist who just travelled on the Mazar-Sheberghan road told AAN of clearly visible Taliban presence in the few villages along this route.