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Non-Pashtun Taliban of the North (2): Case studies of Uzbek Taliban in Faryab and Sar-e Pul

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The Taliban have spent many years ‘localising’ their fight in the north, recruiting local fighters and commanders and keying in to Afghan Uzbek madrassa networks in Pakistan and the north. That drive has paid off; in the Uzbek-majority provinces of Faryab and Sar-e Pul, the Taliban have gained significant ground against the government. In this second dispatch on non-Pashtun Taliban in the north, AAN’s Obaid Ali looks in detail at the movement’s recruitment and force strength and at the threats it poses to both the Afghan government and the pre-eminent Uzbek power-holder, First Vice President General Abdul Dostum (with input from Thomas Ruttig).

A previous [dispatch](#) looked at the Taliban in the Tajik-dominated province of Badakhshan.

Before looking in detail at how the insurgency has played out in the Uzbek majority provinces of



Faryab and Sar-e Pul, it is worth looking at how Uzbeks fared when the Taleban were in power, as the comparisons are useful.

Uzbeks before and during the Taleban's Islamic Emirate

The Taleban movement was founded by Pashtuns in Kandahar in the summer of 1994 as a local force; its initial recruits came from the south, from 'Greater Kandahar', the provinces of Kandahar, Uruzgan and Helmand. Many of the early Taleban had studied in Afghan madrasas, and most of the movement's leaders had fought against the Soviets as members of various mujahedin factions. Often, they were part of specific 'taleban' fronts (*taleban* is the Dari/Pashto plural of *taleb* which means a student of a religious school or madrasa) (see this [AAN paper](#) for more detail: p 10-1).

However, as early as 1995, Tajik and Uzbek religious scholars and students from northern Afghanistan who were based in Pakistan as refugees reached out to the nascent movement. These scholars and students were members of a religious organisation called Jamiat-e Tulaba-ye Afghanistan (Religious Students Association). (1)

Members of Jamiat-e Tulaba (who wished not to be named) explained to AAN that many of the association's members individually approached Taleban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar to express their support. They included Mawlawi Abdul Raqib, an Uzbek from Takhar province who was an influential figure among the Uzbek members of the association and had served as its *sadr* (head), in 1994. He pledged allegiance to the Taleban leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar in 1995 and this encouraged hundreds of Uzbek students from the association and gradually more Uzbek clerics, not only from the association, to join the movement. Mullah Omar immediately appointed Raqib the head of the Taleban's front in Maidan Wardak province (Raqib would later become a minister in the Taleban regime). This led to the first major non-Pashtun element joining the Taleban movement. (There were also Tajiks joining the Taleban movement in the mid-1990s, particularly from Badakhshan – read our previous analysis [here](#)).

Even so, opportunities for Uzbeks – as for other non-Pashtuns, and non-Kandahari Pashtuns – to hold high-ranking positions in the Taleban government remained limited. This continued to be the case for the whole of the Taleban's Emirate (1996-2001). Only a handful of Uzbek clerics served in high positions. They included:

- The already mentioned Mawlawi Abdul Raqib, with the additional *takhallus* of Takhari, as he originates from Kalafgan district in Takhar province. Following his position as commander of the Taleban front in Maidan Wardak, he was appointed head of the Taleban's Refugee and Repatriation Department in Kandahar in 1995, a quasi-ministerial position. After the movement captured Kabul in 1996, he was appointed Minister for Refugees and Repatriation, a position he held until the collapse of the Taleban regime in 2001. Mawlawi Abdul Raqib was assassinated in 2014 in Peshawar by unidentified gunmen (read media report [here](#)).
- Abdul Salaam Hanafi, an Uzbek from Faryab, served as a deputy education minister



during the Taleban's Emirate. He is now a member of the Taleban's political office in Qatar.

- Mawlawi Abdul Rahman, an Uzbek from Faryab, served as the head of the Chamber and Commerce in Herat province and is now the shadow governor for Jowzjan.
- Hafez Nurullah, a Turkmen from Jowzjan province, who served as head of the Hairatan port of Mazar-e Sharif province and is now a member of the military commission of the Taleban, which acts as the movement's quasi-defence ministry, is an example of the presence of representatives of smaller Turkic groups in the Taleban movement.

The Uzbek community also contributed thousands of foot soldiers during the Taleban's Emirate who fought alongside the movement's Pashtun Taleban in the north, but were organisationally separate from them, fighting in distinct frontlines. In many cases, Uzbeks wanted to fight in their own provinces under an Uzbek commander. However, even in Uzbek-dominated provinces like Faryab and Sar-e Pul, the governors and military commanders were Pashtuns and Uzbek fighters fought under Pashtun commanders.

A new generation of Uzbek Taleban

After 2001 and as they sought to fight an insurgency, the Taleban changed tack. They now understood that a localisation of warfare – to have local groups doing the fighting, local commanders leading it and local recruits in their parallel government structure – would better anchor the movement in non-Pashtun areas where they had been relatively weak thus far. (The same has been true in Pashtun, 'non-Kandahari' areas where locals have also been recruited to fight and lead the insurgency.)

In the north of the country, the Taleban started expanding from 2008 onwards, setting up provincial structures (this will be discussed in more detail in a future AAN dispatch). These developments in the north constituted a new phase in the movement's re-launch of its 'jihad' against the government in different parts of the country, following its rebuilding and consolidation of structures in the south. Offering greater room to non-Pashtuns in their ranks also aimed at portraying the Taleban to the population as a multi-ethnic movement rather than solely a Pashtun one (as it is often portrayed, both in Afghanistan and abroad).

This shift in policy offered space for a new generation of non-Pashtuns to serve as Taleban local officials in northern Afghanistan. The drive for their recruitment used the influence and local connections of former pro-Taleban Uzbek figures. It started from and is still heavily based among Uzbek students studying in Pakistani madrasas. According to students who have completed religious schools in Pakistan, thousands of students from rural areas of Faryab and Sar-e Pul provinces attend madrasas in Pakistan with the aim of becoming religious scholars.

However, there are also a large number of unregistered mosques and madrasas in the northern provinces of Afghanistan that constitute a potential local recruiting ground for the Taleban. This seems to reflect a countrywide development, over the last years, where the number of madrasas has multiplied, as a result of local madrasas establishing multiple branches in many



areas. Their imams are mainly appointed by local communities, without any role being taken by governmental authorities. As the imams receive monthly salaries and often free food from the communities, these privileges encourage families to send children to religious schools to become imams themselves. However, most of the families who send their children to such madrasas are not fully aware of the fact that they may not only become religious scholars, but also military recruits. This approach to recruitment by the Taleban has already yielded effective results on the battlefield as will be seen in cases studies of the two provinces.

The case of Faryab

One of the provinces on which the Taleban have focused their local recruitment drive is Faryab where Uzbeks constitute more than half of the population, according to United Nations figures. (2) Faryab is strategically important as it connects the western parts of the country with the north – it was through Faryab that the Taleban moved to capture Mazar-e Sharif in 1997 and 1998 and from where anti-Taleban forces came to re-capture the city in 2001. The province consists of 14 districts; additionally, the district of Ghormach, in neighbouring Badghis, to the west, is sometimes also counted as part of Faryab. (3)

It is hard to estimate the exact proportion of government or Taleban controlled parts of the province. Faryab, however, is generally considered one of the most contested provinces in the north-west. Currently, six districts are fiercely fought over: Almar, Kohistan, Khwaja Sabzposh, Shirin Tagab, Dawlatabad and Ghormach. There, according to several local sources, the government presence is limited to the district centres and a few kilometres around them.

[Kohistan](#) was close to falling to the Taleban in summer 2016 and according to local journalists in three others – Qaisar, Gurziwan and Pashtun Kot – the government and the insurgents each control around half. The remaining parts of the province – the provincial capital, Maimana, Andkhai (the province's second largest city), Khanchar Bagh, Belcheragh, Qurghan and Qaramqul districts – are relatively calm and Taleban activity is limited to far-flung villages.

The spokesman for Faryab's provincial police chief, Karim Yuresh, told AAN that Taleban fighters in Faryab are all locals, whether Uzbek, Tajik or Pashtun. Getting an estimate of their number, or of those newly recruited through the Uzbek madrasa networks, is difficult, however. According to Yuresh, the Taleban have recruited new fighters from areas under their control, increasing overall numbers. He thought there were more than 3,000 Taleban fighters are active in Faryab. Such figures, however, are often exaggerated, and local officials also often do not have a clear picture of the ethnic composition of insurgent groups.

It has been notable, however, that young commanders from Faryab's Uzbek community have increasingly played a leading role in the local insurgency. One notable example is Qari Salahuddin Ayubi, from Almar district. He served as the province's shadow governor and head of the provincial military commission from 2013 to September 2015 when he was captured by the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS), reportedly in Herat province on his way to Kandahar (read the NDS statement [here](#)). Ayubi had mobilised hundreds of fighters against government forces in Faryab and established a special training camp for them in Dawlatabad



district, known as 'Ayubi's Camp'. There, according to sources close to the Taliban, dozens of military experts teach local fighters how to fire light weapons and rocket propelled grenade launchers and give them physical training. In December 2014, the Taliban released the first of a series of videos featuring the camp which showed fighters training, with some fighters firing rifles from moving vehicles. One of the trainers interviewed spoke in Uzbeki about the military training on offer. Other videos featured Salahuddin delivering speeches, again in Uzbeki, about the value of 'jihad' and encouraging fighters, not only in Faryab, but all over the country (the video is no longer available in Taliban's official website). (Local journalists and officials told AAN the videos were genuine.)

Ayubi's arrest, however, has not impeded the insurgency in Faryab. The Taliban quickly introduced a replacement, Mufti Muzafar, another young Uzbek, this time from neighbouring Sar-e Pul province. Under his lead, in October 2015, the Taliban assaulted Maimana, attempting to overrun Faryab's provincial centre. The clash lasted for several hours until finally the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) managed to push the insurgents back (read report [here](#)). Moreover, videos continue to be released featuring the training camp, which despite Muzafar's leadership, is still referred to as 'Ayubi's Camp'.

Since 2008, from well before Ayubi and Muzafar, the Taliban's shadow provincial governor for Faryab has for the most part been an Uzbek. In most districts of the province with Uzbek majority communities, Uzbeks, along with a few Tajiks, serve as Taliban officials. Only in the three remaining districts where Pashtuns form a sizeable part of the local population – Qaisar, Dawlatabad and Shirin Tagab – do Pashtuns serve in mid-level posts. There, also the shadow district governors are local Pashtuns: Mawlawi Allauddin in Qaisar, Mullah Raz Muhammad Khanjari in Dawlatabad and Mullah Mir Agha Waseq in Shirin Tagab.

The case of Sar-e Pul

In Sar-e Pul, the Taliban have also set up an active administration and military structure which consists mainly of non-Pashtun locals. Sar-e Pul, to the east of Faryab and with seven districts (Balkhab, Gosfandi, Sayad, Kohistanat, Sancharak, Suzma Qala and Sar-e Pul centre), has a Uzbek majority population (31 per cent), but there are significant groups of Tajik (25 per cent), Hazara (22 per cent) and Aimaq (11 per cent), as well as pockets of Arabs and Pashtuns, according to United Nation figures.

Since 2012, the province has developed into a Taliban stronghold. (During the Emirate, Balkhab had been a centre of resistance.) Currently, they control more than half of the province. Kohistanat district, for instance, came entirely under Taliban control in July 2015, while Suzma Qala and Sayad are heavily contested, with government control limited to the district centre and nearby villages. In Sancharak, a contested district, government controls around 50 per cent of the district's territory, with the remaining parts under the Taliban. The movement has also maintained a presence in places near the provincial centre. For instance, Sheramah, an area ten kilometres to the west of the provincial governor's office, just beyond the city borders, is entirely under Taliban control (read our previous analysis [here](#)). In the two remaining districts,



Gosfandi and Balkhab, government control is better, but still only limited.

Posts in the Taliban's shadow administration and their military commission in Sar-e Pul are held by non-Pashtun commanders. The shadow provincial governor, Attaullah Omari, an Uzbek originally from Faryab, leads the movement in the province. His deputy, Qari Qudrat, is a Tajik who received a religious education in the Menhaj ul-Saraj madrasa in the province. The military commission is led by Yaqub, an Aimaq originally from Sar-e Pul provincial centre, while the judicial commission is run by Sebghatullah Rohani, an Arab from Sheramah village near the provincial centre. The Taliban have also established a special unit tasked to carry out terror attacks and assassinations of government officials. This unit is led by Ahmadi, an Uzbek from Laghmana village near the provincial centre. The multi-ethnic make-up of key personnel reflects the character of the province. According to Asadullah Khurram, a provincial council member, it is also not only the Uzbek community that contributes fighters. He told AAN that Tajiks, Aimaq and ethnic Arabs are also significantly involved in the insurgency. For instance, Kohistanat with sizeable Aimaq and Tajik populations, the insurgency is led by Aimaqs and Tajiks, while in Uzbek-dominated Suzma Qalah it is led by Uzbeks.

As with Faryab, the Taliban also release regular propaganda videos about their activities in the province. One, distributed in 2015, showed a large gathering of hundreds of Taliban fighters driving vehicles seized from the security forces and gathering to announce their support for the then new (and since deceased) Taliban leader, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansur. Taliban shadow governor Attaullah Omeri delivered a speech in the two main local languages, Dari and Uzbek. In another video released in June 2016, the Taliban in Sar-e Pul pledged allegiance to the next new leader Hibatullah Akhundzada (see video [here](#)). Local journalists, elders and provincial council members confirmed to AAN that the fighters were local and the footage genuine.

General Dostum and his counteroffensives

One major effect of the Taliban's successful recruitment of Uzbeks in northern Afghanistan is the serious challenge it has created to the military and political dominance of Afghanistan's leading Uzbek figure, General Abdul Rashid Dostum, leader of the Jumbesh party. Dostum has so far projected himself successfully as the only leader of the country's Uzbek community. He has been able, in two presidential elections (2009 and 2014), to 'deliver' the Uzbek vote bank to the (Pashtun) winners. (In the 2004 election, he asserted this control by running himself, winning ten per cent of the countrywide vote). In 2014, this tactic gained him the highest position ever held by an Uzbek in the Afghan state, becoming Ashraf Ghani's first vice president. The above case studies of Faryab and Sar-e Pul show that the 'Uzbekisation' of the local Taliban insurgency now mounts the first military challenge to him in his 'heartland' for many years (he lost his previous power base, Mazar-e Sharif and the wider Balkh province, to Ustad Atta Muhammad Nur in a power struggle in 2004).

This nature of the Taliban threat in the north has led Dostum to put considerable efforts into combating it and trying to push back against the Taliban's growing influence in Uzbek



communities. He has personally led a number of counteroffensives against the Taliban, starting in June 2015. They involved both ANSF and locally recruited forces (referred to as militias, 'uprising groups' or, in UNAMA reporting on civilian casualties, 'pro-government armed groups'). There were three such operations in 2015 and 2016 in Faryab alone. In an interview in July 2015 (see [here](#)), Dostum warned the Taliban that unless they laid down their weapons and joined the peace process they would face consequences. In August 2015, he attended a gathering in Almar district of Faryab promising to clear the province of Taliban's existence "within two days" and to make it secure again (see media report [here](#)).

There were some initial successes, but no significant long-term results. After spending several weeks in Faryab in 2015, Dostum's forces managed to push the militants out of most parts of Qaisar, Ghormach, Dawlatabad and Shirin Tagab districts. Afterwards, he continued to Sar-e Pul to coordinate similar clearance operations there. The ANSF in Faryab, however, without establishing strong military bases to protect the areas cleared, handed over security to local forces, including Afghan National Police, Afghan Local Police and anti-Taliban 'uprising groups', and the Taliban were able to retake control of most these vulnerable areas.

In June 2016, a second round of counteroffensive under Dostum's personal command against insurgents in Dawlatabad, Shirin Tagab and Khwaja Sabzposh districts started. Again ANSF and militia forces participated, and again most parts of these districts were cleaned from Taliban presence. When General Dostum returned to Kabul, the counteroffensive remained incomplete.

In October 2016, he donned his military uniform for the third time to coordinate clearance operations in Faryab, particularly with an eye on Ghormach, where the district centre was controlled by insurgents and an Afghan National Army base besieged. After nine consecutive days of fighting and stiff resistance by the Taliban, the Ghormach district centre was cleared and General Dostum returned to his top stronghold in Jowzjan province, Sheberghan.

Dostum's use of militias in his counter-offensives has raised serious questions, with accusations that they have carried out abuses against the civilian population, particularly in Pashtun-inhabited areas (for instance see this Human Rights Watch [report](#) and media reporting [here](#)). UNAMA, in its reporting on civilian casualties, is concerned about the use of 'pro-government armed groups' to fight the Taliban nationally, but has also drawn specific attention to their conduct in Faryab and the north. There, it says, they have carried out "deliberate killings, assaults, extortion, intimidation and property theft." (see AAN report [here](#)) The militias, [UNAMA](#) says, have no basis in Afghan law and "lack the training provided to Afghan national security forces and the discipline and accountability imposed through a formal command structure."

Relying on militias to boost force strength is clearly problematic. General Dostum has also pointed to weaknesses in the ANSF and here, he blames the national leadership. After his third 'tour' in the north, in late October 2016, he lambasted (see reporting [here](#) and [here](#)) both President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, accusing them of ethnic bias in recruitment, of appointing incompetent leaders based on political decisions. He also pointed to



gross corruption in the Ministry of Interior, saying posts in the police were bought and sold. All of this, he said, was undermining the fighting ability and morale of the troops.

Despite Dostum's efforts – and partial achievements – Faryab and Sar-e Pul provinces have remained tense. In the particularly contested district of Ghormach in Faryab, the ANSF is only in control of parts of the district centre, an area of about two kilometres radius round the district governor's compound, while the remaining territory is ruled by the insurgents. In neighbouring Almar district, the Taliban conducted a large scale offensive against the ANSF, attempting to overrun the district centre, in January 2017. The clash continued for a few days and hundreds of families fled to Maimana city. Eventually, the ANSF, with support from the Afghan air-force, managed to stop the Taliban from succeeding (read report [here](#)).

A challenge for Jombesh's dominance among the Uzbeks?

The resilience of the Taliban in the Uzbek-dominated provinces of Faryab and Sar-e Pul demonstrates that their recruitment drive among the local majority ethnic groups was successful. They have established a base there that ANSF and Jombesh forces were unable to wipe out. These findings also confirm earlier AAN research pointing to local non-Pashtun ulama as the entry points for recruitment and mobilisation in northern Afghanistan (see this 2010 [AAN report](#)).

Much remains to be researched on how and why, exactly, the local balance of power has changed. But it can be assumed that one key factor is that, for the first time, conservative religious forces and particularly the clergy in the rural areas of both provinces have, in the now 'multi-ethnic' Taliban, a military and political force they are ready to identify and link up with. In the Taliban, they find a movement that can stand against what had previously been the unchallenged domination of Dostum and his Jombesh party among Uzbeks.

Dostum, however, has shown he can still get the votes out among Uzbeks while Jombesh, a somewhat (in the Afghan context) secular, urban-based party, with a foothold in the central government, has also shown itself able to organise its electorate effectively. The appeal of the Taliban to many young, madrassa-educated Uzbeks has grown and may be a mounting threat to both the government and to General Dostum.

Edited by Thomas Ruttig, Kate Clark and Borhan Osman.

(1) Jamiat-e Tulaba-ye Afghanistan (the Afghanistan Religious Students Association) was initiated by religious scholars and religious students from northern Afghanistan in 1987 during



the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Its main branch first operated in Peshawar, but the association later expanded to madrasas in Lahore, Quetta and Karachi. According to its members, the association was mostly funded through charity and donations collected in the northern Afghan diaspora Pakistan. It had no links with any particular Jihadi tanzim; however, often its members individually took part in the fighting against the Soviets. After Mawlawi Raqib declared allegiance to Mullah Omar in 1995, many prominent members of the association such as Sayed Ghiasuddin (who once served as head of the association), a Tajik minister of Hajj during Taleban's Emirate, and Mawlawi Zia Rahman, a Tajik who served as governor for Logar province during the Taleban's regime and is now a member of Qatar office, followed his example. The association is no longer active in Pakistan, but many other former influential figures served, and continue to do so, as religious teachers in Afghanistan.

(2) According to UNAMA provincial reporting in 2007, the ethnic composition is as follows: Uzbek (51 per cent) followed by Tajik/Aimaq (22.3 per cent) and Pashtun (8.6 per cent).

(3) The case of Ghormach district and the issue of which province it belongs to is discussed in this [AAN dispatch](#) about the neighbouring province of Badghis. Faryab's 14 districts are: Qaisar, Almar, Pashtun Kot, Khawja Sabzposh, Shrin Tagab, Dawlatabad, Andkhai, Khan Char Bagh, Qaramqul, Qurghan, Belcheragh, Gurziwan, Kohistan, and Maimana.