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The Non-Pashtun Taleban of the North (3): The Takhar case study

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Despite some recent gains, the Taliban have struggled to establish a stronger foothold in the north-eastern province of Takhar. One of the reasons the movement they failed to do so have been growing tensions and power struggles among its Uzbek and Pashtun Taliban cadres. Strategically, this has left a geographical gap, preventing them from connecting their fronts in Kunduz and Baghlan to the west and southwest on the one hand, and Badakhshan in the east on the other. AAN's Obaid Ali examines the challenges facing the Taliban's non-Pashtun recruitment policy, which have had a significant impact on the local battleground (with input from Thomas Ruttig).

This dispatch is part of a series on the insurgency, and particularly on the non-Pashtun Taliban in northern Afghanistan. For more on the Uzbek Taliban in the north-west and the Tajik Taliban in the north-east, read our previous analyses [here](#) and [here](#).

In the first half of 2017, the Taliban carried out another series of attacks on district centres and strategic areas in the north-eastern province of Takhar. In March, they unsuccessfully struck at Khwaja Bahauddin's district centre. This was followed in April by an attack on the district centre of Darqad in the far north of the province. Also in this case, the insurgents failed to capture it, but they laid a siege that was only partially lifted by Afghan government forces in June (see media reports [here](#) and [here](#)). In mid-June 2017, Taliban militants overran a number of villages



and government forces checkpoints in Khwaja Bahauddin once again as well as further south, in the district of Khwaja Ghar. In the latter case, local security officials reported that the attackers had crossed over the provincial border from [Kunduz](#). The Taliban also tried to threaten government forces elsewhere in the Mawara-ye Kokcha area but were largely kept at bay by the continuing airstrikes and targeted killings of prominent insurgent commanders by US forces.

An Afghan newspaper, Kabul-based Weesa, reported in May 2017 (1) that the local government in Takhar had decided to move both Darqad and Yangi Qala's district offices to the provincial centre due to prevailing insecurity in those areas. Speaking to AAN, however, provincial police spokesman Khalil Asir said in July that although serious clashes with militants were ongoing in both districts as well as in Khwaja Bahauddin, their administrative offices were still up and running there.

The reports show that the attacks have largely been concentrated in districts north of the Kokcha river, an area called Mawara-ye Kokcha (which includes Khwaja Bahauddin, Dasht-e Qala, Darqad, Yangi Qala, Chahab and Rustaq), and particularly the western half of this region. This area is close to Kunduz province, which has a long-established, strong Taliban presence. All of these districts, apart from Rustaq, share a border with Tajikistan, leading to concerns in Central Asia and Russia of a potential spill-over of insurgent activity. When speaking to AAN, Khwaja Ghar's district governor Muhammad Omar complained about the low number of security forces and lack of morale among the Afghan Local Police (ALP) in Mawara-ye Kokcha.

The development of the militancy in Takhar

Even though the Taliban have made some gains in Takhar, particularly from late 2014 onwards, they have not been able to secure as strong a foothold here as they have in other provinces in the region, such as Kunduz or Baghlan and, in parts, Badakhshan. Strategically, this has left a geographical gap, preventing them from connecting their fronts in Kunduz and Baghlan to the east and south on the one hand, and Badakhshan in the west.

There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, the majority of the two largest ethnic groups among the population (official figures are 44 per cent Uzbek and 42 per cent Tajik) are affiliated with the traditional parties of Jombesh and Jamiat-e Islami, with some Hezb-e Islami enclaves, mainly among Uzbeks and the Pashtun minority (which is around ten per cent). These parties are represented by local strongmen who have strong links to political leaders in Kabul; they can also mobilise groups of armed men or control existing militias. They have carved out areas of influence covering one or sometimes several districts each, through some of which important drug smuggling routes lead into Central Asia. This constitutes a complicated local network of feuds and alliances (see earlier AAN reporting [here](#)).

The second reason is the fragmentation of the insurgents' networks. Non-Pashtun insurgents, mainly Jundullah-affiliated Uzbeks (2), refuse to fight under Pashtun commanders.

The first Taliban recruitment networks were reported to be operating in Namak Ab, Kalafgan



and in the provincial capital of Taloqan by 2007, although in limited numbers. They were reportedly run from abroad by Mawlawi Zia-ur-Rahman Madani, a Tajik originally from Namak Ab district in Takhar who served as provincial governor for Logar province and was later appointed as the military coordinator for the north-eastern region during the Taleban's Islamic Emirate. Now he serves as a member of the Taleban's political office in Qatar.

The first small groups of fighters appeared in 2010. One group arrived from Pakistan and settled around Yangi Qala, Khwaja Bahahuddin and Darqad districts. Their location in the very north of the province indicated that the Taleban had successfully recruited fighters in the Pashtun-dominated district of Darqad. From there, activity spread to neighbouring districts. Other groups emerged further south, in Dasht-e Qala, Khwaja Ghar and Bangi, along the provincial borders with Kunduz and Baghlan, indicating a spread from there. Until 2014, however, the Taleban insurgency in the province had been limited to occasional guerrilla-style attacks against security forces (for more background read AAN's report [here](#), pp 45-9). The presence of international forces in Takhar conducting night raids and search operations, including kill and capture operations (read media reports [here](#) and [here](#)) helped ensure that the Taleban's presence remained limited until the end of 2014.

From then onwards, insurgent activity increased in the west and north of the province as well as in Farkhar district in the east. In the second half of 2015, the Taleban sought to expand their territorial control in Takhar, targeting district centres and challenging district security forces.

In October 2015, the Taleban stormed Darqad district centre after a few hours of resistance and held it for two months, before government forces were able to repel them again (read short report [here](#) and [here](#)). The fall of the Pashtun-dominated district was a cause for serious concern, spreading fear that the militants would establish a foothold in the district and expand their influence throughout the surrounding [districts](#). After an earlier, failed attempt in 2015, the insurgents overran the district centre of Khwaja Ghar in August 2016, although only for a couple of hours (see [here](#) and [here](#)). (3) By the end of the same year, the Taleban had established a strong foothold in the district. At present, only the district centre is in government hands.

The Taleban have failed, however, to take more than very cursory control over district centres in the Uzbek-dominated districts of Mawara-ye Kokcha, although there is some Taleban presence in the countryside. In their latest assessment carried out in March 2017, (4) they claim to control over 40 per cent of Khwaja Bahauddin as well as areas in Khwaja Ghar, Yangi Qala and Dasht-e Qala. The assessment further suggests control of over 20 per cent of Eshkamesh and 15 per cent of Bangi in the south-west. These districts are also labelled as contested in western security assessments, which indicate they have a strong foothold in south-west Eshkamesh.

The remaining areas of the province, including the provincial capital and the districts of Baharak, Chah Ab, Dasht-e Qala, Rustaq, Farkhar, Kalafgan, Namak Ab, Warsaj and Hazar Sumoch, are considered to be largely under government control, even in the Taleban's own assessment.

Afghan security forces have conducted several offensives against the Taleban in vulnerable



districts. These military operations, however, have only produced limited results. Najibullah Haqyar, a civil society activist, accused the local government of unwillingness to eliminate the militants from Takhar. He told AAN that “local officials visit the vulnerable districts, taking photos to circulate on social media.” Insecurity in Mawara-ye Kokcha has had a negative affect on people’s lives. In May 2017, for instance, over a hundred families fled from Khwaja Bahauddin and Darqad to safer areas within the province (read a media report [here](#)).

The Taleban-IMU fragmentation

Until 2014, the different insurgency networks – the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Jundullah and also the emerging Taleban presence – largely fought alongside each other against the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). This unity, however, did not last. In December 2014, the IMU sought to separate its fighters from the Taleban. This followed rumours about the disappearance of the movement’s late leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, to whom they had pledged allegiance. After the Taleban had to publicly admit his demise in August 2015, the IMU shifted its allegiance to Daesh, the so-called Islamic State. This deepened rifts between the Taleban and the IMU, ending up in clashes between them in southern parts of the country. In particular, the Taleban’s assault against the IMU in Zabul province in 2015 (for more details read this AAN [report](#)) had negative repercussions on the insurgents’ northern networks, resulting in serious tensions between the Pashtun and non-Pashtun insurgents in Takhar. It also had negative affects on their military operations there. The Pashtun Taleban in Darqad, for example, refuse to fight under an Uzbek as provincial leader.

The insurgency in Takhar was largely shaped and influenced by Mullah Abdul Salam Baryal, the late shadow governor for neighbouring Kunduz (killed in February 2017) and the most prominent Pashtun Taleban commander in the north-east (read more background on Mullah Salam [here](#)). He played an important role in the appointment of local Taleban officials in Baghlan, Kunduz and Takhar provinces, and was able to do so mainly because of his loyalty to the Taleban’s overall military leader Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansur, who officially became Taleban leader in mid-2015 only to be killed one year later. He implemented the Taleban’s overall policy of appointing more local Uzbek and Tajik commanders to key positions.

In the case of Takhar, Qari Aminullah Tayeb, an Uzbek from the province, was appointed to serve as shadow governor in early 2015 (for more background on Takhar’s shadow governor, read our previous analysis [here](#)). After the IMU switched its allegiance to Daesh in 2015, the Pashtun Taleban disarmed a number of Uzbek Jundullah fighters, including prominent field commanders; they even issued orders to kill or capture them, fearing that they might follow the IMU’s path, switch their allegiance to IS and facilitate the group’s presence in the province. Qari Tayeb criticised these orders (for more details read this AAN [report](#)).

According to sources close to the Taleban, Mullah Salam Baryal, then-shadow governor for Kunduz and head of the military commission for the northern zone, received intelligence that Qari Tayeb intended to mobilise more Uzbek fighters and to establish an independent front, ignoring the Taleban’s Pashtun command. He decided to replace Qari Tayeb and ordered to



disarm him, fearing he might switch sides and become a thorn in the Taleban's side. Mullah Salam introduced Mawlawi Rahmatullah (alias Muhammad), his close aide and a Pashtun from Nahr-ye Sufi village of Chahrdara district in Kunduz to succeed Qari Tayeb. (5) The replacement of an Uzbek by a Pashtun exacerbated existing tensions between the Uzbek and Pashtun Taleban. It also negatively affected the Taleban's non-Pashtun recruitment policy in Takhar. As a result, Taleban provincial posts in the last few months have seen a very quick turnover. This environment of mistrust among the militant groups has prevented the insurgents from gaining further territory.

These tensions, according to locals, continued into early 2017 when a joint delegation of pro-Taleban religious scholars and local commanders from Takhar and Kunduz was tasked with solving the issue. They gave the position to another Uzbek, Mawlawi Nurullah, from Baharak district in Takhar. He had been part of the Taleban movement for a long time, serving as a mid-level commander in Takhar during the Taleban regime in the 1990s. His appointment was a tactical move to keep the allegiance of the Uzbeks as well as to prevent the appointment of someone affiliated with, or close to, the local Uzbek groups IMU and Jundullah.

Even after his replacement, Mawlawi Rahmatullah temporarily remained in Takhar to monitor the Uzbek fighters' activities in Takhar. After the killing of Mullah Salam in Kunduz by a US airstrike in February 2017 (read media report [here](#)), however, Mawlawi Rahmatullah returned there, where he is apparently now serving as the acting shadow governor (read this AAN [report](#)). The appointment of a new Uzbek shadow governor in Takhar has, for the time being, stemmed the tensions between the Uzbeks and the Pashtuns. It has not, however, managed to ensure Jundullah and the IMU-affiliated cadres' loyalty to the Taleban movement. Prominent figures of the IMU and Jundullah continue to run autonomous front.

Conclusion

The Taleban movement in Takhar, as in other northern provinces, has sought to appoint non-Pashtuns to serve as local officials. This was initially to broaden their base in a province that is largely non-Pashtun (much more than in Kunduz, for example); however, following the rift in 2015 with the IMU, it has also been to prevent it from becoming a local Daesh base. But this tactic has not been as successful as in other places, largely due to the more radical Uzbeks' long-term affiliation with and sympathies for the IMU as well as for the Jundullah jihadi networks. Both networks consist of non-Pashtuns who fought alongside the Pashtun Taleban against the government but later (in the case of IMU) changed their allegiance or (as in the case of Jundullah) became unreliable in the eyes of the Taleban for their strong ethnic leanings (read our previous analysis on this [here](#)). It has been a challenge for the Pashtun Taleban to bring the non-Taleban militant groups (IMU and Jundullah) under their banner. When they managed to, temporarily, both groups continued to run autonomous fronts and kept separate command structures. They are also ideologically different from the Taleban. Although both, like the Pashtun Taleban, follow the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, both – in contrast to the Taleban – largely ignore local culture. (6) Nevertheless, there are strong sympathies among Takhari Uzbek fighters for the IMU because of strong feelings of shared linguistic and ethnic backgrounds.



The reappointment of an Uzbek to lead the Taliban insurgency in Takhar has not produced effective results for them on the battleground, neither has it convinced Jundullah or IMU cadres to return to fight under the Taliban's banner. This appears to be due to the lack of a strong Taliban leadership at the provincial level (particularly after the killing of Mullah Salam in Kunduz), as well as to the environment of mutual mistrust among the formerly allied militant groups. The Taliban's strategy to recruit non-Pashtuns as local officials remains a challenge in the province.

(1) Not online. Source: AAN press monitoring.

(2) Jundullah is an indigenous, non-Pashtun armed group in north-eastern Afghanistan made up of radical Uzbeks and Tajiks, with some Arabs and Aimaq. It was initially formed by commanders, who, in 2009, had split from the IMU. Until 2015 Jundullah fought alongside the Taliban against the Afghan government in several districts in the north-east but kept independent fronts with command structures separate from those of the Taliban in the north-east.

The IMU itself began as a militant group trying to overthrow the Islam Karimov government in Uzbekistan; it then played a role in the Tajik civil war in the 1990s, before retreating to Afghanistan in the 1990s, where it pledged allegiance to and became an ally of the Taliban regime (1996-2001). It followed the defeated Taliban into exile in Pakistan and established a new base in Waziristan in 2001. (For previous AAN reporting on the presence of the IMU in the Afghan north, see this [paper](#))

(3) They [claimed](#) the same for Yangi Qala and Eshkashem in late September 2015.

(4) The Taliban have started to issue their own reports – and maps – showing areas they claim to control, entitled “Areas under Taliban Control.” (read their latest assessment [here](#)).

(5) Muhammad and Mullah Salam were arrested in Pakistan in February 2012 and detained for over two years. Both were released after a delegation from the Afghan High Peace Council urged Pakistan to free captured Taliban from its prisons. Muhammad also served as shadow provincial governor in Baghlan.

(6) In contrast to the Taliban, IMU and Jundullah ignore, for example, elements of local culture such as local elders' mediation in conflicts and the consultation of tribal elders on important issues. Both groups only accept the views of religious scholars in solving disputes.