

To: Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) Leadership
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Recent Tactical Losses Require Military Pullback and Diversification into Criminal Activity – Three Strategic Partnerships & Funding Streams

The IMU has recently experienced significant losses in its military capacity with the death of Aziz Yuldash by Afghan forces in November 2020. At the current moment, this makes it untenable to continue military operations in the region without reorganization. Our foothold in the Faryab Province of Northern Afghanistan presents a unique opportunity to leverage our geographic position and social capital to rebuild organizational capacity. Three key relationships and funding streams have been identified to serve this aim: (1) relationships with IS-K present an opportunity to facilitate the traffic of heroin and valuable minerals along the Northern Route; (2) our historic relationship with Tehrik-e-Taliban can assist in the facilitation of cash flows on a regional and international basis; (3) recent developments with the ETIM offer a chance to assist in troop transport to bolster alliances and diversify self-funding mechanisms. This three-pronged approach will allow a period to reconstitute our command structure and build asset reserves at this critical juncture.

Current State of IMU Structural Integrity

IMU operations have suffered significant tactical setbacks with the killing of Aziz Yuldash during a joint operation by Afghan defense and security forces in the Haji Saeed Gul village of the Gormach District.¹ This is just southwest of the section of Faryab Province that we currently consider our greatest stronghold. This leaves the IMU with a notable lack of military leadership at a moment during which an important area to our south remains under threat. Possible succession in IMU leadership could come from his son, Hikmat, though he was wounded during the operation.²

The current IMU membership stands at approximately 150 to 200³ and a full inventory of weapons and supplies is currently underway. Notwithstanding the November 2020 attack in the Gormach District, the IMU has suffered losses after the late 2015 announcement of support for the Islamic State, after which the Taliban killed approximately 90% of IMU forces in the Zabul Province in the south.⁴ Furthermore, a large number of IMU members defected to the Islamic State – Khorasan Province (IS-K) in recent years.⁵

In terms of geographic control, we remain largely confined to the north-central band of Afghan territory. Afghan security activities as well as Taliban forces restrict our movements to the south. However, we are also able to move from Faryab Province into Turkmenistan and from the northern Afghan provinces into Uzbekistan. We do continue to have support primarily located in the Ferghana Valley region of Uzbekistan, as that remains an important recruitment location.⁶ Unfortunately, this remains of little immediate tactical military advantage given its distance from Afghanistan. Such considerations greatly inform the recommendations herein.

Relevant Regional & International Developments

There are three key developments on the regional scale that require brief note here and have an impact on the calculus for IMU strategy. Given their timing, these three variables also indicate why now is an important time for the IMU to implement this plan starting immediately in Q1 of 2021.

- (1) The U.S.-Taliban Peace Deal has a condition in which the Taliban has, for the moment, agreed to cease association with foreign terrorist groups.⁷ This leaves a number of other organizations – many of whom are our former collaborators – much more alienated and in need of revised allyship.
- (2) The drawdown of U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Iraq makes this a critical moment in acting to restore our capacity through diversification into crime and other activities. The Trump Administration has announced a withdrawal of 2,500 troops from Afghanistan and Iraq, with plans to completely remove U.S. troops from the former by May 2021.⁸ This not only means less hostile military presence from American forces but will keep Afghan security more preoccupied with nation-building and defending against the ramifications of a regional power vacuum. While the IMU is not strong enough to wage an offensive, this leaves opportunity to build our capacity for future military action. However, it is unclear if the Biden Administration will continue this trend, so it is essential to act swiftly during this period.
- (3) The repression of the Uighur Muslims and counterterrorism activities by the Chinese government in the region are fueling a great amount of disdain among regional actors. This motivation can be an important point of agreement when forging the recommended alliances. Furthermore, the international outcry to the repression of the Uighurs in China is an opportunity for recruitment and fundraising (overt and covert) that resonates with a much broader audience.

Rationale for a Multi-Pronged Approach

A multi-pronged approach was developed for a number of reasons, chief among them being that our current organizational integrity is weakened. If we take on a diversified approach, we are able to hedge effectively in a multivariate environment, as we will not be dependent on a single revenue stream or partnership. Such diversification in strategy is not new to the IMU. In 2015, our then leader Usman Ghazi declared public support for the Islamic State (IS) while still respecting allegiance (“*bay`a*”) to Mullah Omar of the Taliban.⁹ Whereas our relationship with the Taliban has since disintegrated due to several factors, this was key as it allowed for recruits and resources to come in from IS while not completely severing ties with the Taliban. Such a pragmatic hedge with various alliances would be prudent to continue in 2021, as the landscape of political coalitions between regional groups is unclear.

Our position in Northern Afghanistan enable us to carry out several high value-add activities that do not necessitate extensive travel out of our area of control. Our stronghold is within relatively short distance from the borders of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Iran. We also have transit capabilities to the Pakistani border further east. This means that much of the transit traveling through the Northern Route passes through this region. Hence, the funding streams mentioned below can be realized by capitalizing on our sphere of influence therein.

Taken together, it becomes clear that a multi-pronged approach can maximize gains while simultaneously minimizing volatility.

Three Strategic Alliances

Three alliance partners have been identified that (in conjunction with the buildup of the funding mechanisms outlined in the following section) will enable us to reestablish regional dominance and further our founding principles. These potential alliance partners were chosen with two primary considerations in mind: (1) prior instances of cooperation and ideological alignment; and (2) our ability to leverage those relationships to bolster our coffers and military foothold.

(1) Islamic State – Khorasan (IS-K)

The IS-K, a branch of the Islamic State, can play an important role in our efforts. The IS-K is most established in the Nangarhar Province of Eastern Afghanistan and recent activity over 2020 shows sustained attack patterns in Jalalabad¹⁰ and even Kabul.¹¹ This demonstrates a capacity of the IS-K to move relatively unhindered from the east towards the north-central corridor of Afghanistan and is an important linchpin in the flow of goods and people across the country.

The IS-K also saw many of our former IMU members join their efforts in late 2015 and early 2016 after Ghazi's declaration of support of the Islamic State.¹² There are thus a large number of Uzbek fighters that are already in their ranks. While these defections may have hurt our military capacity over the preceding years, this will allow for greater touchpoints when initiating conversation.

(2) Tehrik-e-Taliban in Pakistan (TTP)

The TTP has been active in jihad against the Pakistani Government and also operates in the eastern region of Afghanistan and well into Pakistan. We have a deep history of collaboration with the TTP, with our former leader Tohir Yuldash living with TTP founder Baitullah Mehsud in 2009 and becoming his "biggest ideological inspiration".¹³ Since then, we worked closely with the TTP in their attack on Jinnah International Airport in Karachi in 2014 and their Ansar al-Aseen operation to free TTP militants from Pakistani prisons.¹⁴

This past ideological and operational collaboration provides fertile ground to further relationship building into the 2020's. Balancing relationships between the Islamic State and the TTP will be delicate but can be done. Even so, the relationship between the TTP and the Afghan Taliban are not particularly strong, particularly following the 2014 Peshawar School Massacre.¹⁵ There are pragmatic considerations both sides will take into account and our plan to work with the TTP does not necessitate their movement into Afghan territory where they might run into IS-K forces.

(3) Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)

The ETIM is a group that seeks to replace China's Xinjiang Province with the independent state of East Turkistan. We have collaborated briefly with ETIM in the past, namely by assisting in mounting a few attacks against Chinese targets in Kyrgyzstan.¹⁶

The ETIM also recently had its designation as a terrorist organization by the United States government removed.¹⁷ While this clearly doesn't negate hostility from other regional powers, it provides some lessening of pressure against them with regard to the international community at large. Coupled with U.S. troop withdrawal, this may lead to a revival of the ETIM and the Uighur insurgency in Central Asia.¹⁸ Bolstering a relationship with them now could provide us with much more leverage across the region in the long-term.

At the moment, a notable contingent of ETIM members is attempting to seek passage from Idlib, Turkey through Iran and into northern Afghanistan.

Three Funding Streams

(1) Drug Trafficking & Facilitation of Natural Resource Flows through the Northern Route

The IMU has considerable experience in the trafficking of drugs during its collaboration with the Taliban. Since the late 1990's and into the mid 2010's, we had assisted the Taliban trafficking drugs from Afghanistan into Central Asia.¹⁹ Now we can turn this capacity to assisting the organized crime syndicates of Uzbekistan. The northern provinces of Afghanistan (including Faryab) have seen an over 40% increase in opium cultivation in the late 2010's.²⁰ However, the aggregate amount can be bolstered by cultivation in Nangarhar Province where IS-K holds a strong presence. Nangarhar has also seen a strong increase in cultivation but boasts a much greater 10 to 25 thousand hectares for the crop.²¹

While IS-K has thus far eschewed involvement in the drug trade, we believe we have a strong negotiating point on this front. Given that IS-K traffics in lumber and other valuable minerals in their territory²², we could provide the opportunity to expand their trade flows up through the Northern Route into Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. This would allow us to build trade ties as well as take a commission for the transshipments. They could additionally add poppies and/or opium along with these natural resources for further transshipment north without the necessity to be heavily involved themselves. While the Afghan-Uzbek border remains heavily guarded, we can leverage our position to facilitate flows of drugs and other goods up through the sparsely guarded Turkmen-Uzbek border.²³

(2) Financial Transaction Capability & Self-Funding

A renewed relationship with the TTP would offer us increased capacity for financial transactions internationally. The TTP has a history of robust hawala networks, including those that funded the 2010 attempted car bombing in New York City by Faisal Shahzad.²⁴ In 2008 our associate Irfan Demirtas and nine others were arrested for funneling money to the IMU. During that time, the network was able to raise at least 300,000 euros.²⁵ Utilizing a more established network of hawaladars in Central Asia and Europe would ensure more security in international financial transactions and money laundering.

In addition to increased security, fundraising has ample opportunity for expansion. The international reaction to the suppression of and genocidal action against the Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang is a fruitful platform for fundraising. This can be carried out both overtly and covertly, with the former methodology targeting donors in Central Asia already sympathetic to our cause. Covert means would be targeting donors in Europe and America who do not know the ultimate destination of the funds other than ambiguously framed "support" for the Uighurs in Xinjiang.

A combination of cryptocurrency wallets (held by our associates in Europe) and hawaladars can funnel funds while concealing the recipients. Not only does it provide more funding streams to further the jihad, but further demonstrates our ideological support for ETIM at a critical moment.

(3) Facilitation of Troops Flows & Paid Protection Services

The final source of funding would be to offer paid protection services to groups transiting the northern corridor of Afghanistan. As mentioned above, the ETIM are currently in the process of planning a relocation of members from the Jisr al-Shughur area of Idlib, Turkey to the northern provinces of Afghanistan.²⁶ Slightly to the north-east and east of our stronghold are the Afghan-Tajik border and Wakhan Corridor respectively, which both provide entry into Xinjiang province.

By offering safe passage and tactical support throughout this region, we can make commission while supporting and building alliances with a group with burgeoning military capacity.

Conclusion

The simultaneous execution of these approaches would expand our revenues and our hold over the northern most region of Afghanistan. It would also enable us to offer strategic support to key groups at a time when the Taliban Peace Talks are causing a major shift in regional alliances:

- (1) The IS-K still holds a significant number of Uzbek fighters among its troops and building out our relationship with them would offer a greater level of eastward mobility. We could also traffic their lumber, minerals and talc up through the northern route as well as poppies/opium from Nangarhar Province and our territories.
- (2) By focusing on leveraging the hawala systems of TTP, we would be able to move money from fundraising and other activities in a more secure and expedient manner. Since hawala does not need physical cross-border cash movement to operate, we would not be risking potential conflict between TTP and any other groups in Eastern Afghanistan (including IS-K). All transactions could be conducted from within Pakistani territory.
- (3) ETIM contingents in Turkey are seeking to head east and mobilize in Northern Afghanistan at a time when they are receiving less scrutiny from U.S. counterterrorism efforts and increased frustration with the Uighur situation on the international stage is growing. Assisting in this mobilization not only squares within our own ideological framework but can be an additional funding stream and strengthened alliance with a growing regional power. Furthermore, by tying the narrative of justice for the Uighurs into our fundraising platforms abroad, we can reach a larger audience even if they are unaware that the funds will ultimately go towards IMU-ETIM operations.

While the quarterly amount of revenue made from this strategy is still yet to be determined, we estimate that the newly proposed funding would be composed at roughly the following proportions:

- Drug Trafficking: 40%
- Trafficking of IS-K Natural Resources: 25%
- Fundraising: 15%
- Paid ETIM Protection & Passage: 10%

Even though the IMU has suffered losses in the recent months, the pursual of this strategy over 2021 would put us on course for revitalization and greater control of a critical region of Afghan territory.

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