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Bayram Balci

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From Fergana Valley to Syria - the Transformation of Central Asian Radical Islam

Bayram Balci, Sciences Po, Center for International Studies (CERI), CNRS, Paris, France

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The radical jihadi group known as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union. A little bit more than twenty years after it first appeared, this on-going transformation has made it less connected to Uzbekistan, and more to a global jihad.

Following the end of the Soviet Union, a couple of Islamic organizations emerged in the Uzbek city of Namangan in the Fergana Valley, like *Islam Lashkarlari* (Islam's soldiers) or *Adolat* (Justice). Repressed by the new Uzbek regime, some of them managed to escape and join the United Uzbek Opposition in neighboring Tajikistan. When the Tajik peace agreement was signed between the different factions, ending the civil war, Uzbek Islamists decided not to join it but to set up their own organization, the *O'zbekiston Islomiy Harakati*, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, or IMU. A little bit more than twenty years after it first appeared, this movement has changed considerably in its tactics as well as in its ideology and objectives. This on-going transformation has made this movement and more broadly, Uzbek jihadists, less and less connected to their original homeland, Central Asia, and more and more involved in a global jihad, first in Waziristan, and now in Syria.

Before its founding by Tohir Yoldashev and Juma Namangani, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan was an informal religious association interested first of all in the spiritual awakening of the local population in the Fergana Valley. Its initial successes right after Uzbekistan's independence and the state's harsh repression encouraged the IMU to develop more political ambitions, a politicization strongly fought by Uzbek authorities. Consolidated in Tajikistan, where it had benefited from the chaos of the civil war from 1992 to 1997, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan then took refuge in Afghanistan after a peace truce conciliated the different Tajik factions in 1998. In Tajikistan, the IMU's main objective was to topple the Uzbek regime and to install an Islamic state in Uzbekistan. However, after this movement took refuge in Afghanistan, with the support and the hospitality of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, it gradually started to abandon its Uzbek objectives, adopting the priorities of its hosts. The U.S. intervention in Afghanistan and Pakistan eliminated its two leaders—Juma Namangani in 2001 and Tohir Yoldashev in 2009—and forced the Uzbek jihadists to move into Waziristan. The IMU's strong cooperation with the Taliban and Al Qaeda contributed to a certain degree to its assimilation by these two protectors. In Afghanistan, IMU objectives moved away from their initial goal of ousting the Uzbek government and establishing an Islamic regime in all Central Asia, becoming more and more involved in a global jihad. In terms of actions, we saw an IMU more and more involved in attacks against Pakistani, Afghan, and U.S. military targets. It seems that even its ethnic composition has considerably changed—a lot of non-Uzbeks started to be active in the IMU. A good illustration of how the IMU has diverged from its Central Asian objectives was the Karachi airport attack that was perpetrated with a very strong involvement by the IMU. According to several sources, the IMU was the most important mastermind of the attack. Last, but not least, an analysis of IMU leaders' discourse on YouTube and on its website shows that it has largely abandoned its tirades against Central Asian regimes in favor of a passion for a global jihad.

The emergence of a new jihad field in Syria has brought a second phase of disengagement of Central Asian jihadists from their homeland. Indeed, there have been several reports attesting to the existence of Central Asian jihadists in Syria since the civil war transformed that country into a new Jihadistan, attracting Islamist nihilists from different parts of the world. Kazakhs, Kirghiz, and of course Uzbek jihadists are reportedly involved in different groups in Syria. Uzbeks are apparently the most important Central Asian group to have joined the civil war in Syria.

According to several serious sources, the IMU in Afghanistan and Pakistan is even becoming a secondary force compared to the emergence of a new Uzbek jihadi movement that operates in Syria. According to several digital sources, the Uzbek jihadi group involved in Syria, the Imam al Buhari brigade, is now even stronger than the IMU. A serious and solid work on this movement is not easy to conduct, but, once again, the videos posted by Uzbek jihadists and their own publications give us some signs about their objectives. First of all, it seems that the Uzbek jihadists involved in jihadi actions in Syria and Iraq are mostly Uzbeks of the “diaspora,” that is Uzbek migrants from Russia, but also Uzbeks of Kirgizstan, and apparently, some young Uzbek students who left their country years ago and are living in Turkey and Saud Arabia. Uzbek jihadists in Syria and Iraq are apparently under the command of Abu Yahya and Umar Shishani (a Chechen from Pankisi in Georgia) and fight with other jihadists from the former Soviet Union. The Buhari brigade is actually a new jihadi group that includes a limited number of ex-members of the IMU which continues to be a close ally to Haqqani. Indeed, as the first leaders of IMU had sworn allegiance to Mullah Omar, the current IMU members have to continue this loyalty to the Taliban. It seems that the IMU, because of its allegiance to the Taliban, is even reluctant to send its members to the Middle East. However, there is a clear indication that the Buhari brigade and its leaders are loyal to Abu Bakir al Baghdadi.

This de facto “de-uzbekification” we observe in the IMU should not be surprising. Indeed, the first IMU militants left their homeland at the beginning of the 1990s and took refuge in Tajikistan, but then later started to have families in the FATA region of Pakistan. It is, however, true that during the first years of its presence in Tajikistan and then in Afghanistan the IMU continued to recruit Uzbeks from Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries. But more than twenty years after its departure from its homeland, the IMU felt the need to recruit new militants abroad, among Uzbeks of Afghanistan and even from other ethnic groups. The emergence of Central Asian jihadists in the Middle East, mainly Uzbek, is to a large extent a new and decisive phase of this “de-uzbekification” and disconnection of Central Asian jihadists from their homeland.